(De)constructing family: exploring communicative practices in accomplishing and maintaining estrangement between adult children and their parents

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(DE)CONSTRUCTING FAMILY: EXPLORING COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES IN
ACCOMPLISHING AND MAINTAINING ESTRANGEMENT BETWEEN ADULT
CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS

by

Kristina Scharp

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requirements for the Doctor of
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars contend that family relationships are nonvoluntary despite evidence that suggests family estrangement is both prevalent and on the rise. Typically, family estrangement is a significant life rupture often brought on by physical, emotional, or psychological abuse. In order to explore this understudied phenomenon, I began by applying a discourse dependence perspective framework to analyze 52 accounts from adult children who voluntarily and intentionally distanced themselves from a parent or parents with whom they had a negative relationship. Specifically, I engaged in thematic analysis to explore the communicative practices adult children enact to accomplish and maintain distance with a parent or parents as well as the practices they use to disclose and sustain their estrangement to members of their social network.

Based on in-depth interviews, results suggest that estrangement is a complex process that requires many communicative practices. Specifically, adult children engaged in declarative, one-time, and continuous practices to accomplish and maintain distance with a parent or parents. Adult children reported having to spend a considerable amount of time engaging in communicative practices to maintain the distance, suggesting that relational maintenance is not only a constellation of practices that keep relationships close. Additional results suggest that the majority of participants did not disclose their estrangement to members of their social work. In the event others knew about the distance, it was typically because they were there to witness the distancing practices or because the participant conditionally disclosed the information. Similar to the emphasis on maintenance, adult children revealed that sustaining the estrangement required extensive communicative work. In other words, adult children had to resist social network members who sought to reconcile them with their parents. Taken together, results from this study hold promising theoretical and practical implications for researchers, clinicians, social network members, and other individuals going through the estrangement process. These implications and directions for research are discussed.
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INTRODUCTION

Existing research (e.g., Bersheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989) documents the importance of closeness in interpersonal relationships. Individuals, however, might not always want to increase closeness or might not benefit from strengthening relational ties. Consequently, accomplishing and maintaining distance might be a fruitful and overlooked avenue for relationship research. As Hess (2000) suggests, limiting our conception of close relationships as those that individuals actively seek to maintain, “misrepresents the nature of many interpersonal relationships, and it directs scholars away from examining relational dynamics that may [sic] be informative” (p. 459). Thus, research suggests that despite the positive outcomes associated with closeness, closeness is not always desirable and might even detract from understanding distancing practices as important mechanisms to construct healthy relationships. Problematizing closeness as a strictly positive construct, then, might encourage scholars to examine the ways distancing can be a healthy alternative for both relational parties to staying in emotionally, physically, and psychologically abusive relationships. Understanding more about distancing practices might also hold potential for counselors and social network members seeking to provide support for individuals in unhealthy environments.

Given the potential for research on distancing (Hess, 2000), this study attempts to explore the phenomenon of family estrangement, particularly estrangement between adult children and their parents. The purpose of this study, specifically, is to explore the communicative practices adult children enact to accomplish and maintain distance with a parent or parents as well as to explore they ways they disclose and sustain their estrangement to members of their social network, including members of their immediate family. Unlike distancing research between friends and/or romantic partners (e.g., Helgeson, Shaver & Dyer, 1987), the phenomenon of family estrangement challenges the ingrained idea that family relationships are close and unbreakable (e.g., Hess, 2000). As Vangelisti (2006) explains:
The involuntary nature of family relationships as well as their “staying power” place tight constraints on individuals’ relational alternatives. In the best of worlds, when family members are happy and well-adjusted, these constraints may [sic] increase members’ commitment to each other and to the family as a whole. However, in the worst of worlds, when family members are distressed, psychologically troubled, or abused, the same restrictions may [sic] place them at a great deal of risk (xv).

In light of this astute observation, this present study acknowledges that although most of the current family estrangement literature positions distance as negative and undesirable (e.g., Aglias, 2011a; Datillio & Nichols, 2011), family estrangement might reduce conflict, alleviate stress, and increase psychological well-being among the family members experiencing the estrangement as well as their social networks. Thus, the context of family estrangement has the potential to be bright, dark, and somewhere fluctuating along those binary poles.

The Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication

Spitzberg and Cupach (1998, 2007), the first to invoke the “dark side” metaphor in communication studies, argue that dark side topics are those that emphasize the destructive, distortive, and exploitive interactions that influence our interpersonal relationships. Specifically, Spitzberg & Cupach (2007) conceive the dark side of interpersonal communication as a function of two conceptual dimensions: (1) normatively and morally appropriate versus normatively and morally inappropriate, and (2) functionally productive versus functionally destructive. The first dimension speaks to whether a behavior or a given phenomenon receives approval from members of the culture at large. In other words, this dimension determines whether the culture evaluates a behavior as good or bad. The second dimension represents the extent to which a behavior improves or impairs the survival or thriving of an individual or relational system (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Put differently, this dimension determines whether a behavior or phenomenon is helpful or hurtful. Taken together, Spitzberg and Cupach (2007) conceptualize dark communication as a schema with four domains. The first
domain is the *bright side*, which encompasses contexts that are perceived as both good and relationally helpful. Phenomena that members of a culture perceive as normative but are communicatively enacted in ways that are destructive, belong in the second domain: *what once was bright is now dark*. For example, Americans typically approve of parents who correct their children when they make mistakes. Yet, the same action can become destructive if parents verbally berate their children for mild transgressions. In contrast, contexts that members of a culture perceive as normatively inappropriate and turn out to be functionally productive, belong to the third domain: *what once was dark is now bright*. For example, in America, divorce is not the end goal of getting married. However, divorce becomes functionally productive if the couple separates because one partner is abusive. Finally, topics belonging to the *evil incarnate* category are those that members of a culture perceive to be bad and are hurtful to the relationship. Thus, a given context or behavior is not inherently dark or bright. As Spitzberg and Cupach suggest, “the dark side is as comfortable with stereotypically “bright” concepts as it is with stereotypically “dark” concepts” (p. 7). Thus, both cultural context and communicative execution are important factors in determining whether a topic is bright or dark.

Baxter, Norwood, and Nebel (2012) have also argued for a third dimension of dark side communication based on aesthetics. They contend that interpersonal relating can be beautiful, ugly, or simultaneously both (e.g., poetic justice). Thus, in addition to moral appropriateness and functionality, “relating can be appreciated simply for the beauty of how it is accomplished” (p. 35). In this scenario, revenge might be sweet in its execution, just, or poetic as it unfolds. Regardless of the number of dimensions, the dark side of communication emphasizes the complexity of relational behaviors, interaction, and phenomena as well as the potential for valence fluidity (interactions that change from good to bad or bad to good). In taking a dark side perspective, researchers cannot assume that a given phenomenon is inherently positive or negative, but rather, must be open to a multitude of (sometimes conflicting) ways individuals accomplish, maintain, and make
meaning of their interpersonal relationships. Consequently, the dark side of communication offers a foundation to study parent-children estrangement, which leaves open the possibility that family closeness is not inherently positive and distancing practices might ultimately lead to healthier environments.

**Constructing Perceptions of Deviance and Destruction**

As articulated, researchers interested in dark side phenomena must be open to the possibility that any given interaction, relationship, or behavior has the potential to be both dark and bright. But, what then, makes a context normal or deviant? Helpful or hurtful? What moves an interaction from one quadrant to another? From a social constructionist perspective (see Gergen & Gergen, 2003), phenomena and interactions do not inherently possess characteristics, instead, individuals communicatively construct the meanings of those phenomena (Pearce, 1995, p. 90). Put simply, a social constructionist framework asserts that individuals speak their realities into being. In this regard, language becomes the mechanism by which meaning is made. Moving along the quadrants, then, is accomplished through communicative interaction. In speaking, individuals respond to cultural influences and simultaneously reify or resist their perception of social reality. As it happens, what is helpful or hurtful in a given relationship might be very particular to the relational parties’ beliefs about themselves, about each other, and about world at large. What topics are dark for one relationship might be bright for another (e.g., jealousy). What is helpful to one family might be hurtful to another depending on the way they communicate about any given topic.

In closing, Olson, Baiocchi-Wagner, Kratzer and Symonds (2012) contend that the darkness within a family communicative interaction is not a binary (i.e., presence or absence) but rather an issue of degree. This statement also alludes to the importance of communication in determining whether family estrangement is stressful or smooth. In other words, family communication is the mechanism by which accomplishing and maintaining parent-child estrangement yields the desired outcome for both the individuals
involved as well as for other social network members. Communication, then, not only has the power to constitute the experience as bright and dark but also to deconstruct and reconstruct what it means to be a family. With this in mind, the goal of this study, broadly, is to explore the process of (de)constructing family by examining the communicative practices used to accomplish and maintain estrangement between adult children and their parents.
CHAPTER ONE
A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many scholars contend that family relationships are nonvoluntary (e.g., Hess, 2000). This might be one reason that the family estrangement is rarely referenced in the research literature (Agllias, 2011a), and official statistical evidence (e.g., census information or national surveys) of family estrangement is nonexistent (LeBey, 2001). Yet, family estrangement is a common problem raised in clinical practice, and Dattilio and Nichols (2011) argue that, “For every client who seeks help with estrangement, there may [sic] be three or four cases in which a rift isn’t mentioned but nevertheless exerts a poisonous influence on the family in treatment” (p. 88). Given the evidence of its increasing prevalence (Jaffe, Ashbourne, & Mamo, 2010), it might come as no surprise that a preliminary search using a popular Internet search engine reveals hundreds of websites, books, and groups dedicated to supporting, explaining, and comforting families experiencing estrangement. For the purpose of this study, estrangement is conceptualized as an intentional, voluntary communicative effort to gain distance from a negative relationship commonly taken-for-granted as undissolvable. Furthermore, family estrangement can be unilateral or bilateral, emphasizing the possibility that one family member might want to maintain the relationship while the other does not. Specifically, studying parent-child estrangement is important because it holds potential to contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon. Learning more about family estrangement might help counselors better advise their clients and also might illuminate new facets of relationship dissolution by exploring the nonvoluntary relationship case. In other words, relationship dissolution primarily focuses on relationships where the parties, at least initially, chose to establish the relationship. Parent-child estrangement is a unique context where many scholars believe that the relational parties have no viable choice but to maintain it. In addition, studying parent-child estrangement might help us learn more about how this significant family disruption influences the well-being of the entire family.
Finally, family estrangement also emphasizes the role communication plays in constituting family relationships, which might create possibilities for constructing alternative family forms. Put differently, when individuals communicatively distance themselves from their biological or legal family, they emphasize the ability of language to de(construct) what it means to be a family. In particular, the purpose of this study is to explore how parent-child estrangement is communicatively accomplished and sustained both internally (to the target parent) and externally (to the social network, including other family members). To lay the framework for this project, the review of literature begins with a discussion of ways in which scholars have conceptualized parent-child alienation and family estrangement. Following this is an exposition of Galvin’s (2006) discourse dependence perspective, a perspective based on a social constructionist framework. Extending from this discussion is an argument for why this study is important. Finally, research questions are posed.

**Scholarly Conceptions of Parent-Child Alienation and Family Estrangement**

Family estrangement, and parent-child estrangement specifically, has been under-researched (Dattilio & Nichols, 2011) and under-conceptualized (Agllias, 2013a). As suggested, the dearth of literature surrounding this topic is, however, not surprising considering many scholars believe that family relationships are nonvoluntary (Floyd & Morman, 2006; Hess, 2000). In fact, Afifi, Olson, and Armstrong (2005) argue that, “Given the involuntary nature of family, family members typically cannot exit their families and find alternative ones” (p. 567). Yet, research surrounding parent-child alienation and family estrangement is slowly becoming more prevalent as both family courts and clinical practices are seeing a rise in allegations and reports of both parental alienation and parent-child estrangement (Bala, Hunt & McCarney, 2010; Jaffe, Ashbourne, & Mamo, 2010). In other words, individuals who experience family estrangement are increasingly seeking psychological counseling for their distress and potentially spending valuable resources such as time and money for legal hearings.
Historically, research pertaining to parent-child estrangement has emerged from studies about post-divorce parent-child alienation (Carr et al., 2011). As a result of different and nuanced definitions, it might not be surprising that scholars cannot agree on what it means to be alienated or estranged from a parent (Drozd & Oleson, 2004). Some scholars (e.g., Sullivan, Ward, & Deutsch, 2010) even use parent-alienation and estrangement synonymously. Darnall (1998) contends that parent alienation refers to any constellation of conscious or unconscious behaviors that might induce disturbance in the relationship between the child and target parent. For the purposes of this study, parent-child estrangement is conceptualized communicatively and recognizes the complexity of the estrangement process and the importance communication plays in establishing, maintaining, and explaining the phenomenon to others. Consequently, this review of literature not only focuses on the research traditions of parent-child alienation and family estrangement, but also illuminates the need for a communication perspective.

Parent-Child Alienation (Syndrome)

Due to its many definitions and lack of empirical research, mental health and legal professionals largely vary in their understanding of parent alienation (Bow, Gould, & Flens, 2009). The disturbance that leads to alienation is often a result of an event or series of events arising from marital dissolution (Friedlander & Walters, 2010). Some definitions suggest that parent-alienation is a syndrome (PAS) that results when one parent intentionally manipulates a (minor) child’s feelings and beliefs about the other parent (Gardner, 1985). In fact, Gardner (1992) argues that PAS is a diagnosable disorder that results from two main factors: (1) programming or brainwashing of the child by one parent against the target parent and (2) the child’s vilification of the target parent. He further suggests that PAS is characterized by the following eight components: (1) campaign denigration against the target parent, (2) inconsistent, illogical, weak, or absurd rationalizations given by the child for rejecting the target parent, (3) child’s use of phrases, terms, or scenarios that do not reflect the child’s experience or are
developmentally inappropriate, (4) the children’s lack of ambivalence towards either or both parents, (5) contention about whether the decision to reject the child originated with the child, (6) child’s unconditional and automatic support for the alienating parent, and (8) increased animosity directed toward the target parent’s family.

Yet, many scholars have criticized this conceptualization of PAS, claiming that it does not meet syndrome requirements (Myers, 1993), or DSM-IV diagnostic criteria (Kelly & Johnston, 2001), that PAS might occur in the absence of manipulation (Johnston, 1993), that PAS lacks adequate empirical study (Kelly & Johnston, 2001), and that generally, Gardner’s self-published work lacks acceptance from the scientific and legal communities (Faller, 1998). As a result of these critiques, Kelly and Johnston (2001) re-conceptualize parent alienation syndrome as child alienation describing an alienated child as “one who expresses, freely and persistently, unreasonable negative feelings and beliefs (such as anger, hatred, rejection, and/or fear) toward a parent that are significantly disproportionate to the child’s actual experience with that parent” (p. 251). They specifically distinguish parent-child alienation from estrangement, citing that estranged children reject the target parent based on some form of abuse. In a legal context, distinguishing parent-child alienation from parent-child estrangement has important consequences for custody decisions (Drozd & Olesen, 2004). Kelly and Johnston also argue that child alienation occurs on a five point spectrum following separation and divorce. At one end point of the continuum are children with positive relationships with their parents. The second point is called affinity, where children have a closer relationship with one parent but still desire contact with both. The third point describes allied children who have an alliance and consistent preference for one parent but do not completely reject the other parent. At the other end of the spectrum, estranged children reject the target parent as a result of any type of abuse and finally, alienated children openly express rejection of the parent with no guilt or ambivalence.
Other scholars (e.g., Drozd & Oleson, 2004) argue that courts should use causal factors (i.e., reason for parental rejection) to make custody decisions, and Friedlander and Walters (2010) use causal factors to define estrangement as the impairment of the parent-child relationship as a result of realistic problems brought to the relationship by the rejected or resisted parent. Regardless of nuanced distinctions, parent alienation frequently occurs in young adolescents in response to their parent’s divorce and is often considered a nonvoluntary decision (Bow, Gould, & Flens, 2009; Friedlander & Walters, 2010).

Distinct from parent-child alienation, parent-child estrangement is another family disruption that is becoming more prevalent in court hearings (Bala, Hunt & McCarney, 2010). Family estrangement can occur for a variety of reasons (e.g., a specific family event or ongoing family misconduct (Carr et al., 2011; Drozd & Olesen, 2004; Friedlander & Walters, 2010), and for the purposes of this study is both voluntary and intentional. Unlike parent-child alienation that typically involves children under the age of 18, both minor and adult children might engage in the estrangement process. This study focuses on adult children who arguably have gained a certain amount of autonomy from their parents’ influence.

Family Estrangement

In addition to conceptualizations that stem from parent-child alienation, other scholars (e.g., Agllias, 2011b) are beginning to explore the phenomenon of family estrangement in response to an increase in clients seeking treatment due to their estrangement. In particular, Agllias (2011a) contends that family estrangement is the “physical distancing and loss of affection between family members, often due to intense conflict or ongoing disagreement” (p. 107). She identifies five indicators that characterize the estrangement experience: (1) physical distance, (2) lack of emotional intimacy, (3) an unsatisfactory relationship, (4) intermittent conflict and avoidance, and (5) a belief that there is no resolution. From her perspective, family estrangement can be
a psychological phenomenon of ambiguous loss where the estranged person experiences a physical presence of the target person (i.e., their parent is still alive) and a psychological absence (see Boss, 2006). Aglias (2011a) also argues that estranged family members experience disenfranchised grief where the person’s grief is not openly acknowledged, publically mourned, or socially supported (see Doka, 1989). Although her definition is largely based on feelings, perceptions and beliefs, she proposes a behavioral operationalization, emphasizing the importance of understanding the practices that constitute the estrangement (Aglias 2011a). For example, she claims a lack of emotional intimacy is indicated when patients say, “We don’t speak to each other anymore” or intermittent conflict and avoidance is indicated by claims such as, “I had to leave to stop the fighting” (p. 92).

Aglias’ (2011a) conceptualization is a particular exception in the estrangement literature because her definition is explicit. Like the parent-alienation literature, family estrangement is often discussed in the abstract without any empirical evidence to support either a conceptualization or operationalization of the term (e.g., Kayser, 1996). For example, Dattilio and Nichols (2011) do not provide an explicit definition of family estrangement but allude to the idea that family estrangement is emotional and involves a “family feud”. Winters, Stinchfield, Lee, and Latimer (2008) suggest that family estrangement is the opposite of family connectedness and use measures that capture a lack of family solidarity, a lack of closeness, and a presence of parent-child conflict to operationalize the concept. These measures, although they could be appropriate, might not necessarily capture the estrangement experience. For example, Golish (2000) found that it is not atypical for parents and children to experience conflict during their lifetime. The presence of conflict, then, does not seem to adequately characterize children who are estranged from a parent.

In addition to relying on causal factors thought to define estrangement, scholars have historically based their conceptualization on ideas of emotional distance or cutoff
(Bowen, 1982). Jerrome (1994), for example, conceptualizes family estrangement as “losing touch” but seems to root that idea in emotional distance. Warshak (2010) contends that estranged children are physically apart from a parent in addition to feeling emotionally separated. Finally, Kim (2006) suggests that estrangement is a decrease in emotional closeness but chooses to operationalize estrangement as a lack of communication.

Corresponding with Kim’s (2006) operationalization, Carr et al. (2011) argue that parent-child estrangement is purposeful and characterized by a lack of communication. These authors situate the conceptualization of parent-child estrangement as a particular type of communication practice. Yet, ceasing communication with a family member with whom you share a long relational history might not be accomplished easily. Moreover, social network ties (i.e., other family members and friends) might make communication cessation extremely difficult, if not impractical due social network attempts at reconciliation or traditions or rituals such as shared holidays or reunions where both parties might be in attendance. In addition, given that many scholars assume (e.g., Schneider, 1980) family relationships last an individual’s entire life, maintaining a “lack of communication” might also take extensive communicative work. Consequently, establishing and maintaining estrangement might include a multitude of communication practices that vary depending on the audience, individual, and culture.

Closeness (Patterns) and Decreasing Interdependence: The Value of a Communication Perspective

According to Dibble, Levine, and Park (2012), relationship closeness is “the degree of affective, cognitive, and behavioral mutual dependence between two people, including the frequency of their impact on one another and the strength of impact per occurrence” (p. 565). In other words, these authors argue that closeness is synonymous with interdependence. Studies reveal the ways closeness influences contexts such as the willingness to forgive (Karremans et al., 2011), the longevity of a relationship/likelihood
of break-up (Bersheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989), and positive academic achievement outcomes (Lee, Kushner, & Cho, 2007). Floyd and Parks (1995) go as far as to assert that closeness is critical to the human existence, and Golish (2000) contends that closeness is an essential element in personal relationships. Thus, it might come as no surprise that many studies feature closeness as a catalyst for (arguably) positive outcomes (e.g., Amato, 1994; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1991). As Baxter (2006) succinctly explains, traditional approaches “tend to position ‘closeness’ as a positive, whereas ‘distance’ is viewed as negative, a symptom of problems. As it happens, scholars often regard closeness as an optimal outcome or catalyst for optimal outcomes.

Yet, individuals might not always want to maintain a close relationship with individuals who adversely impact their well-being. A study by Kellermann and Lee (2001), for example, reveals that individuals, “report intentionally trying to make others dislike them about two times every 3 months … and that others deliberately seek disaffinity from them to about the same extent” (p. 18). In romantic relationships, Mashek and Sherman (2004) found that between 5% and 19% of individuals feel “too close” to their romantic partners, and about 50% feel too close to their partners on occasion. Thus, individuals perceive that too much interdependence and closeness with either friends or romantic partners can be undesirable. In regard to outcomes, Savitsky, Keysar, Epley, Carter, and Swanson (2010) found that individuals overestimated their ability to communicate to close friends or family members and that perceived closeness increased an individual’s egocentrism, which often hindered perspective taking and satisfying communication.

In order to explore changes in closeness between adult children and their parents, Golish (2000) conducted a turning points analysis. Her results reveal four adult child-parent closeness patterns: (1) single major disruption, (2) irregular cycle, (3) sustained, low to moderate degree of closeness (i.e., parents and children who are not close and have never been close), and (4) sustained, high degree of closeness. Specifically, the
most common pattern, the single major disruption pattern, characterizes adult children who could recall one negative turning point with their parents. This result suggests that this pattern is a typical part of the growing-up process. As Golish (2000) explains, “However, as this pattern reveals, all of the participants were able to recover from this major disruption and regain their ‘typical’ level of closeness with their parents” (p. 93). Thus, parent-child closeness might vary across the lifespan but interaction patterns suggest that most disruptions do not have lasting negative relationship implications. Specifically, adult children attributed their ability to increase closeness with their parent by communicating honestly, respectfully, and with affection. Alternatively, her data suggest that a lack of communication functions to decrease closeness. This result emphasizes the importance of communication in decreasing interdependence (i.e., the extent to which family members depend on each other for their functioning.)

In contrast to the single major disruption pattern (an arguably common parent-child interaction), family estrangement might go beyond a one-time event and have a lasting influence on the parent-child relationship. According to Blieszner and Adams (1995), negative feelings and fights that often end friendships and romantic relationships hardly ever terminate parent-child relationships. It stands to reason then, that the catalysts for family estrangement might be particularly severe. Specifically, Carr and colleagues (2011) conducted a study to determine the attributions for estrangement.

A study by Carr et al. (2011) reveals three catalysts adult children describe as attributions for their estrangement. First, the intrapersonal theme depicts an internal characteristic of at least one of the members of the estranged relationship. Second, the intrafamily theme describes a negative behavior occurring between or involving the estranged family members. Finally, interfamily issues are those that existed outside of the estranged family relationship all were catalysts for parent-children estrangement.

Intrapersonal attributions include parental mental illness, self-centeredness, and perceptions of being unsupported/unaccepted. At the intrafamily level, adult children
attribute their estrangement to abuse, conflict rivalry, control, deception, divorce, drug/alcohol use or abuse, entitlement, and toxicity. Finally, adult children report physical/geographical separation and objectionable relationships to be the interfamily causes of their estrangement. Overall, their findings reveal that parent-child estrangement can happen for a variety of reasons at different times across the lifespan. This finding adds new information to research (e.g., Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Kim, 2006) that would suggest estrangement occurs during adolescence. Moreover, Carr et al. (2011) contend that although conflict contributes to the estrangement, communication between parents and children about the conflict heavily influence their relationship. They (2011) argue “family events such as divorce played an important role in many of the participants’ reasons for becoming estranged, but it seems that parents’ reaction [emphasis in the original] to the circumstances surrounding these events were much more significant in terms of family functioning” (p. 29). This finding is evident in the result that indicates adult children report feeling judged, unloved, unaccepted, and unsupported by parents in the face of conflict or adversity. Thus, communication practices are not only the means by which parents and children accomplish the estrangement but also one of the main reasons for it.

For the attributions outlined above, adult children might intentionally enact communicative practices to distance themselves voluntarily from their negative relationship with a parent or parents. A definition of estrangement based on communicative practices emphasizes that relationships are constituted in communication, and can be consequently undone through communicative practices despite the dominant cultural perception that families are nonvoluntary relationships (see Hess, 2000). Communicative practices that work to break up the family are those that decrease interdependence among family members. Specifically, a study by Laursen and Williams (1997) reveals that interdependence emerged as a particularly salient feature of vertical (i.e., hierarchical power relationships) nonvoluntary relationships. They concluded that
interdependence is a defining feature of parent-child relationships and that interdependence appears to be the “critical mechanism underlying distinctions between voluntary and involuntary relationships” (p. 18). Specifically they found that interdependence, which is operationalized behaviorally, is more strongly associated with the strength of the parent-child relationship than is closeness, which is operationalized psychologically. This result suggests that understanding communicative practices might be particularly important in understanding parent-child relationships.

Furthermore, Davis (1973) argues that relational parties in close relationships have developed multiple types of interdependence, which Baxter (1982) contends includes “everything from the very identities of the relationship parties to their overlapping and shared social networks” (p. 224). Baxter continues to argue that the complexities that emerge from this pervasive interdependence necessitate that relational parties who are close must openly communicate in order to disengage from a relationship with such interwoven ties. Therefore, given that the parent-child relationship is presumed to be one of the closest (Knoester, 2003) and most enduring (Troll & Fingerman, 1996) relational bond, an emphasis on communication is essential to the conceptualization and study of parent-child estrangement.

Conceptualizing estrangement as a communicative process of decreasing interdependence resulting from a negative relationship promotes a definition of parent-child estrangement that is continuous as opposed to binary. Thus, adult children can be more or less estranged depending on their behaviors. Furthermore, this move from a psychological perspective to a communicative conceptualization emphasizes interaction as the defining feature of a relationship as opposed to causes or representational outward markers of internal emotional status.

As alluded to previously, even though this study focuses on adult children who estrange themselves from a parent, estrangement can be either unilateral or bilateral (as evidenced by existing relationship dissolution research; see Baxter, 1984). In other
words, my conceptualization of estrangement acknowledges that at least one individual intentionally and voluntarily seeks to distance him or herself from the negative relationship but it might be the case that both relational parties (i.e., adult children and parents) are communicatively working towards the end of the estrangement continuum.

Finally, Kelly and Johnston (2001) argue that current conceptualizations of parent-alienation fail to shed light on the cause, enactment, and treatment of the rejecting behaviors rendering the definition insufficient and unhelpful to courts, clinicians, and clients “all of whom would be better served by a more specific description of the child’s behavior in the context of his or her family” (p. 250). Even though the authors were directing their observation towards parent alienation, this critique is salient to the estrangement literature as well. Thus, with an acknowledgement that parent-child estrangement might be a result of many factors and result in a variety of outcomes, this study focuses on the ways adult children communicatively behave; that is the ways they communicatively (verbally and nonverbally) accomplish and maintain distance with the target parent and how they communicate their estrangement, thus constituting it as a social reality, to their social networks (including other family members).

**Discourse Dependence**

Given the value of a communication perspective in conceptualizing estrangement, this study now turns to a discussion of Galvin’s (2006) discourse dependence perspective. The concept of discourse dependence corresponds to a social constructionist framework in its articulation of a constitutive view of language (see Gergen, 1985). Baxter (2006) contends that taking a constitutive approach to communication requires that scholars ask how communication defines and constructs the social world, which includes our selves, our families, and our personal relationships. Taking a constitutive approach requires a belief that relationships get spoken into being (and presumably, non-being) as opposed to an alternative where communication resides “in” our relationships (Baxter, 2004). A social constructionist perspective foregrounds communication, emphasizing, “the
situated, interactional patterns that creatively evoke, sometimes validate, sometimes negotiate, sometimes embattle, sometimes transform, social selves, relations and institutions” (Carbaugh & Hastings, 1995, p. 172). Consequently, a perspective that bases its foundation in a social constructionist perspective is especially appropriate for examining communication practices that help define a family’s identity.

Specifically, Galvin’s (2006) discourse dependence perspective emphasizes the importance of communication in constructing and deconstructing the family. As part of both construction and deconstruction enactments, Galvin (2006) argues that discourse dependent families have to regularly negotiate both internal and external boundary management practices. In other words, family members not only have to establish what it means to be a family to each other (i.e., internal) but also must legitimate their relationship to the outside world (i.e., external). Furthermore, she argues that family members feel compelled to perform a variety of discourse strategies (i.e., communicative practices) to create, maintain, and disconfirm relationships. While she contends that some families must engage in these communicative practices more than others (i.e., the more non-normative the family form, the greater the role of discourse in family construction and maintenance), she argues that all families develop in whole or in part through discursive construction.

Conversely, Galvin (in press) also argues that discourse also has the power to “deconstruct” family relationships. As Leeds-Hurwitz (2006) concludes, without communication, family identities dissipate, dissolve, and essentially cease to exist. In particular, Galvin (in press) argues:

When one or more family members acts in ways contrary to the beliefs or values of other members, or are viewed as unwelcome for a myriad of reasons, offended members may enact communicative deconstruction strategies, assertively or reluctantly, in an attempt to remove such persons from family membership (p. XX).

She continues to suggest that deconstruction strategies might take several forms (e.g., direct rejection messages) but research to date has failed to illuminate what
communicative deconstruction strategies family members use from the perspective of the family members engaged in the deconstruction. Furthermore, family members might not only use communication practices to remove unwanted family members, but they might also simply use communication distancing strategies to remove themselves from the family. Either way, communication is the mechanism that accomplishes the construction and deconstruction of the family relationship.

Although we lack a native’s perspective, Hess’ (2000) work on maintaining nonvoluntary relationships might inform what we know about behaviors associated with relational distancing. According to Hess, nonvoluntary relationships include family relationships, work relationships, and social relationships where the individuals feel like they have no viable option except for relational maintenance. His study focuses on individuals who have a nonvoluntary relationship with someone whom they dislike. Specifically he hypothesizes that those individuals will attempt to mitigate their discomfort by increasing psychological distance. His research delineates 36 behaviors (e.g., express detachment, avoiding involvement, and showing antagonism) participants use to achieve distance. Despite this informative research, Hess randomly assigned his students to the “nonvoluntary with a disliked partner” condition to test his hypotheses. Consequently, we do not know whether the students assigned to this group actually had a discomforting nonvoluntary relationship with a family member, boss, roommate, or member of a sports team and whether that nonvoluntary relationship or relational experience was particularly salient to the student. Thus, an investigation into the communication practices of adult children estranged from a target parent might yield very different results from the practices reported by university students in a hypothetical study.

In addition to distancing themselves from their family, adult children might also employ different discursive practices to explain their distancing behaviors to other immediate family members, extended family members, or members of their social network. According to Galvin (2006), questions and challenges emerge when families
appear different to outsiders. Although we have some insight into general distancing behaviors from Hess’ work (2000) between disliked partners (i.e., internal boundary management), Galvin contends we know little about how families with differences communicate their family identity to outsiders (i.e., external boundary management). Specifically, how do adult children communicate their estrangement to their social network members, particularly other family members who still have a close relationship with the target parent? In addition, communicating about their estrangement might also be problematic for adult children when they have to negotiate how much to disclose to individuals outside of the family, especially when the reason for the estrangement is sensitive or traumatic. Consequently, estranged adult children might perceive that their estranged relationship is stigmatized and feel the pressure to communicatively work to mitigate anticipated adverse reactions. Taken together, Galvin’s (2006) discourse dependence perspective provides a compelling heuristic to explore the ways adult children estrange themselves from their parents and the ways they communicate that estrangement to individuals both inside and outside of the family.

**Study Significance**

In addition to acknowledging the inherent role of communication in accomplishing estrangement, exploring parent-child estrangement from a communicative perspective can provide other valuable insights. Understanding specific communicative practices has the potential to inform the ways individuals dissolve nonvoluntary relationships, to help strengthen the links between estrangement and psychological well-being, and finally to emphasize the power that communication has in constituting what it means to be a family. Each of these potential contributions is elaborated in turn.

**Contribution to Relationship Dissolution Literature**

Relationship dissolution is stressful to the parties involved and to their social networks (Ickles & Simpson; Noller & Galois, 1988). Some scholars (e.g., Cody, 1982) have studied relationship dissolution from a communicative perspective. For example,
Knapp (1978) conceptualizes dissolution as the communicative process of returning to strangerhood; where relating partners engage in a five-step process of (1) differentiating, (2) circumscribing, (3) stagnating, (4) avoiding, and (5) terminating. Duck (1982; 2005), on the other hand, contends that there are five phases to relationship dissolution: (1) intra-psychic phase, (2) dyadic phase, (3) social phase, (4) the grave-dressing phase and (5) resurrection. His model suggests that individuals first psychologically struggle with their relational dissatisfaction (i.e., intra-psychic phase) before negotiating dissolution with their partners (i.e., dyadic phase). Next, individuals must present their dissolution to their social network (i.e., social phase) before recounting a plausible relationship history and presenting themselves in a way that the larger culture deems suitable (i.e., grave-dressing phase). Duck (2005) labels the last phase resurrection and describes this phase as the ways that individuals prepare themselves to re-enter the social order as desirable, acceptable, and available. Next, Baxter (1984) reports a study that focuses on the dyadic phase of Duck’s model emphasizing the situational and individual differences affecting dissolution as well as the general characteristics of relationship dissolution. She puts forth a model of dissolution that emphasizes dissolution as a relational process that is comprised of five distinct features: (1) unilateral/bilateral exit resolution, (2) direct/indirect disengagement action, (3) single/multiple passes through the model, (4) attempted/unattempted repair action, and (5) termination/continuation outcome.

Specifically, unilateral and bilateral exit resolution refers to whether one or both parties desire the dissolution. Direct and indirect disengagement refers to whether at least one party explicitly discussed the desire for dissolution as opposed to other strategies such as withdrawal. Third, single/multiple passes through the model refers to whether the initiator must make multiple attempts at dissolution. Next, she describes whether the relational parties attempt to mend the relationship. Finally, termination/continuation is the final decision to either remain together or dissolve.
In particular, Baxter’s (1984) study illuminates that relationship dissolution can be particularly messy (e.g., multiple negotiations or need for a variety of disengagement actions) depending on whether both relational parties agree to dissolve the relationship. For example, Davis (1973) argues that it is more likely for one party to have a unilateral desire to exit the relationship while the other party desires relationship continuation. In the context of estrangement, an unmatched desire for relationship dissolution, then, might require the adult child to work extremely hard communicatively to accomplish estrangement, especially considering that the parent might resist the dissolution or believe that dissolution is impossible. In the event some level of estrangement is accomplished, an unmatched desire might also require the adult child to work actively to maintain the estrangement with the target parent. A failure to communicatively maintain estrangement might lead to an on-again/off-again relationship often seen in romantic relationships (see Dailey, Rossetto, Pfiester & Surra, 2009), making the communicative practices for estrangement maintenance just as important, if not more so, than the practices that accomplished the estrangement in the first place.

In the context of divorce (see Fine & Harvey, 2006), Kayser and Rao (2006) argue that unlike other types of relationship dissolution, divorce is often the result of marital disaffection. This process includes: (1) beginning disappointments, often a result of changes in partner interaction, (2) escalating anger and hurt, often a result of anticipated or actual negatively valanced partner behavior, and finally (3) reaching apathy and indifference, often signifying a “point of no return” where couples no longer feel they can maintain the relationship. Furthermore, Hagestad and Smyer (1982) argue that divorce is not only a process that affects emotions but also influences identity construction. Specifically, they contend that with dissolution comes a loss of status, loss of identity role, and loss of important routines and roles. As Rollie and Duck (2006) argue “Many daily routines provide not only a structure for daily life but also a sense of identity and purpose. Often their value is not fully recognized until they can no longer be
enacted” (p. 228). Their argument emphasizes that dissolution is not merely an emotional cutoff, but a process that influences the ways individuals make sense of themselves and others. Taken together, these process models suggest that decreasing interdependence requires communicative action and negotiation in order to dissolve the relationship and explain the dissolution to others.

Scholars also have examined dissolution practices depending on relationship type. For example, Baxter (1982) explores differences in dissolution strategies between close and very close friends. Cody (1982) expanded on this work by focusing on the communicative practices involved with dissolving romantic relationships. He argues that different relationship types require different dissolution strategies, especially when the relationship is highly interdependent. For example, Hill, Rubin, and Peplau (1976) argue that the ways individual dissolve marital versus dating relationships are not necessarily the same. They suggest that dissolving dating relationships are less stressful because there is no associated stigma and individuals can typically recover and move on. In the case of parent-child estrangement, adult children might also experience a significant amount of stress considering the experience is highly stigmatized (Agllias, 2013b). Bohannan (1968), furthermore, highlights that in a divorce context couples not only go through an emotional divorce like other romantic partners, but also a legal divorce, which has both economic ramifications and consequences when the couple shares children. He also contends that the divorcing couple must go through a community divorce, or a process that restructures the social network. Sprecher, Felmlee, Schmeeckle and Shu (2006) argue that social networks play a significant role in relationship dissolution, especially in the context of divorce. For example, a national sample of married individuals reveal that 33% of the participants felt that their social network’s approval or disapproval was a potential facilitator or barrier to getting a divorce (Knoester & Booth, 2000). This finding suggests that individuals care about their social networks’ opinion of their relationship status, which might hold interesting implications for the ways in
individuals communicate their dissolution to their network members. This might be particularly true when social network members have close affiliations with both relational partners, such as a brother or sister who act as a sibling to the adult child and as a child to the target parent.

Despite what we know about relational dissolution between friends, romantic partners, and married couples, little is known about the dissolution of seemingly nonvoluntary relationships. Building on Cody’s (1982) argument, dissolving family relationships, especially the relationship an adult child has with a parent, might look very different from other communicative dissolution practices given the relational history and presumed interconnectedness between the adult child and parent. Even in the instance of divorce, the marital couple presumably chooses to create the familial relationship at its beginning. Exploring communicative practices in this nonvoluntary context is important because we know that the way we dissolve a relationship has ramifications for the anxiety associated with that experience and future interaction between the relational parties (Banks, Altendorf, Greene & Cody, 1987; Baxter, 1986; Metts, Cupach, & Bejlovec, 1989).

In particular, Koenig Kellas et al. (2008) argue that relationship scholars often ignore the fact that dissolved relational parties communicate post-dissolution and that the way the dissolution is accomplished might impact those interactions. Rollie and Duck (2006) explain, “Not only is communication during the process significant, but it also has important roles afterward as people adjust themselves and their embedding social expectations and ease into the future form of their relational life” (p. 237). For example, a study by Lambert and Hughes (2010) indicates that a positive tone (e.g., attending to the partner’s feelings) “predicted less PDR [post-dissolution relationship] communication satisfaction” for the recipient of the break-up message (p. 180). While this finding might seem counter-intuitive, the authors suggest that without providing negative attributions, the other partner might perceive the break-up initiator to be disingenuous and be
confused as to why dissolution occurred. Their findings ultimately reveal that communication practices, such as using a positive tone to establish dissolution, impact future interactions and reduce the other partner’s goodwill towards them. Furthermore, Koenig Kellas et al. (2008) argue that the trajectory of the dissolution (e.g., linear process, relational decline, upward relational progression, and turbulent relational progression) and the communication between the parties during that trajectory also impact individual well-being and ability to adjust. These findings all correspond to research (e.g., Bachman & Guerrero, 2006) that reveals the communicative practices that disengagers employ impact satisfaction and commitment. Thus, how (i.e., the communicative practices) individuals dissolve their relationships impacts factors such psychological well-being and satisfaction, not simply that the relationship dissolves.

In sum, exploring parent-child estrangement extends dissolution research to encompass relationships typically considered nonvoluntary and stigmatized. In this regard, the communicative behaviors that accomplish estrangement not only provide insight into dissolution processes, but also suggest the need to explore estrangement maintenance behaviors. Furthermore, research on divorce suggests that individuals care about their social network members’ perceptions of the dissolution, reinforcing the importance of also examining how adult children communicate their estrangement to their social network. Taken together, the present study seeks to illuminate the communicative behaviors surrounding the dissolution process in a nonvoluntary context especially in light of the fact that the way we communicate influences emotional well-being. Given that relationship dissolution is stressful, the next section focuses on the potential contribution this study can make to the well-being literature.

Contribution to Psychological Well-Beer Literature

Current research suggests that family estrangement has severe personal ramifications for individuals’ well-being and proves to be a significant life rupture (Agllias, 2011a; Agllias, 2011b; Dattilio & Nichols, 2011; Winters, Stinchfield, Lee,
Latimer, 2008). In the case of parents and children, this might come as no surprise considering the parent-child relationship is considered one of the strongest relational bonds, and positive parent-child relationships are closely linked to positive mental well-being (Knoester, 2003). Yet, researchers that focus on estrangement outcomes (e.g., Winters, Stinchfield, Lee, & Latimer, 2008) have typically made assumptions about what behaviors constitute estrangement in order to operationalize the phenomenon. This study will illuminate the communicative practices identified by the individuals who are actually accomplishing and maintaining distance with a parent or parents.

Understanding the communicative practices between the adult child and target parents, however, is just one factor that might impact the adult child’s psychological well-being. Afifi, Hutchinson, and Krouse (2006) observe, “Family members respond and adapt to stress based on their interactions with other family members. Their responses to stress are often a function of other family members’ stress and their ability to adapt to it, as well as their ability to cope by communicating with one another” (p. 383). In other words, the ways adult children communicate about their estrangement might impact the adult children themselves and their extended family members. Consequently, exploring communicative practices may not only impact the adult child and target parent’s well-being but also the entire family and extended social network.

Specifically, Heaney and Israel (2008) define social networks as a web of social relationships that surround individuals (i.e., the cast of important others) and the linkages between individuals that might or might not facilitate social support (i.e., how relationships interplay to facilitate or hinder support). For many individuals, family members are an integral part of a social network and are often defined as systems (Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2006).

A systems perspective emphasizes the following social characteristics: (1) interdependence, (2) wholeness, (3) patterns/regularities, (4) interactive complexity, (5) openness, (6) complex relationships, and (7) equifinality (Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel,
First, \textit{interdependence} suggests that when a change occurs that affects one part of the system, it actually influences the whole system. Thus, disruption to one or two members of the family may actually impact all family members. Second, \textit{wholeness} refers to the idea that emergent properties that characterize each individual member might ultimately represent an entire family. Third, \textit{pattern/regularities} refers to the patterns that family systems engage, which makes their lives predictable and manageable. For example, communication rules might represent a type of family pattern. Fourth, Galvin, Dickson, and Marrow (2006) claim that, “From a systems perspective, interaction patterns trump cause/effect analysis” In other words, \textit{interactive complexity} means that blaming one family member is unproductive given the fact that all members play a part in creating problematic patterns. Fifth, \textit{openness} refers to the idea that the family systems permit interchange with surrounding environments. This interchange allows for growth and change. Next, \textit{complex relationships} emerge due to different combinations of interlocutors, the psychobiological system of each individual, and the cultural norms that influence interaction. In addition, \textit{complex relationships} refer to the alliances and coalitions members of the family system create to alleviate conflict or establish predictable interaction patterns. Finally, \textit{equifinality} refers to the idea that there might be more than one path to achieve a desired goal. Taken together, these characteristics suggest interpersonal conflict between parents and children not only affects the members engaged in the conflict but also the entire family system. Consequently, adult children seeking to estrange themselves from a parent might also have to take steps to distance themselves from other members of their family regardless of a desire to do so. Communication, then, might be particularly important when presenting the estrangement to other members of both the immediate and extended family.

Researchers (e.g., Christakis & Fowler, 2012; Smith & Mackie, 2008) also suggest that families might experience a phenomenon called emotional contagion when
faced with conflict. According to Hatfield, Cacioppo and Rapson (1994), emotion contagion describes instances when individuals have a special sensitivity to others’ emotions and unintentionally “catch” the emotions they perceive or mimic others’ emotional communication. Although often considered a generally healthy trait, Weisbuch, Ambady, Slepian, and Jimerson (2011) conclude that individuals who reap the psychological benefits of being in positive contexts also suffer the consequences of being in negative contexts. They argue that “individuals who are especially susceptible to emotion contagion should be especially influenced by the negative emotions of family members” (p. 717). Thus, family members might not only suffer from the negative conditions that served as the catalyst for the estrangement but also the resulting negative emotions and outcomes regardless of whether the family member is directly involved with the estrangement. In fact, researchers have (e.g., Cacioppo et al., 2009; Rosenquist et al., 2011) found that even depression and loneliness can spread throughout close relationships and even broader social networks. Even communicating about the emotionally charged event could be a catalyst for negative emotion contagion (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995).

On the other hand, researchers (e.g., Christakis & Fowler, 2012) suggest that emotional contagion also can positively influence a network. In the case of parent-child estrangement, it is possible adult children and their families might experience benefits if they collectively distance themselves from a negative influence (e.g., the target parent). For example, a family, minus a particular family member, might become less stressed, experience less conflict, and increase the quantity and quality of their positive interactions. These outcomes might lead to increased positive emotions that the entire family has the potential from which to benefit. Thus, exploring the communication practices adult children enact with their family members about their estrangement from a parent might influence the well-being and communication practices of the family members who bear witness.
Social networks, however, often include more than just family members. Research suggests that these people salient to the relationship dissolution initiator can impact a variety of outcomes including whether the relationship terminates (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007), whether a couple experiences negative romantic outcomes (Bryan, Fitzpatrick, Crawford, & Fischer, 2002) and whether the initiator continues to communicate with their former partner after dissolution (Lanutti & Cameron, 2002). In addition, Banks, Altendorf, Greene, and Cody (1987) conducted a study that reveals that the disengagers’ social networks largely influence the communication practices they use to accomplish the dissolution and how those strategies make them feel about themselves. Put differently, individuals might experience negative emotions or decreased well-being if they perceive that their social network disapproves of their relational dissolution communication practices.

Although scholars (e.g., Agllias, 2011a) often position estrangement as traumatic, sometimes decreasing interdependence with a family member might be a healthy solution to an unhealthy relationship. As argued, creating distance might lead to positive emotional contagion in the family system. Thus, in concert with a dark side perspective that acknowledges how different contexts might yield paradoxical outcomes (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007), family estrangement might have positive influences on individuals’ psychological well-being. For example, Goodall and Kellett (2004) argue that conflict can motivate individuals to make changes in their lives that bring them greater happiness. Kellett (2007) also contends that conflict can bring about desired change, healthy transformations, and more productive interpersonal relationships. In addition, research suggests that trauma symptoms significantly decrease after women distance themselves from abusive relationships over a six month (Dutton & Painter, 1993) and one year interval (Mertin & Mohr, 2001). In other words, leaving a physical, emotional, and or psychologically abusive relationship is associated with increased well-being. Finally, a study by Anderson (2001) reveals that positive aspects of well-being, especially
perceived quality of life, increased numerous times for women who were able to maintain
distance from their abusers at least two years after they accomplished the initial
distancing. Taken together, these positive outcomes associated with interpersonal
conflict and distancing from abusive relationships provide evidence that family
estrangement can be both psychologically damaging as well as productive.

In addition to informing the dissolution research, exploring the communicative
practices adult children use to accomplish and maintain distance, as well as how they
communicate to social network members, might also inform research on psychological
well-being. First, exploring behavior might help researchers from all fields
operationalize a behavioral measure of family estrangement. This measure could be used
to learn more about the positive and negative outcomes associated with family
estrangement. Second, studying family estrangement might have implications for the
psychological well-being of the entire family system, especially considering the influence
of negative contagion. As it happens, counseling might be appropriate for all members of
the family regardless of whether they are personally involved in the estrangement
process. Finally, research on parent-child estrangement might also inform other abusive
relationships especially pertaining to behaviors that enable victims of abuse to leave
unhealthy relationship. Attending to the psychological health of distressed individuals is
important, especially considering family estrangement is simultaneously on the rise and
understudied. As argued, studying family estrangement has the potential to contribute to
dissolution research and psychological well-being literature. Perhaps most important,
however, is the contribution to family literature and the implications parent-child
estrangement might have on cultural understandings of the American family.

Contribution to Family Literature

Finally, illuminating communication practices surrounding estrangement might
also have consequences for what it means to be a family. Traditionally, scholars (e.g.,
Wamboldt & Reiss, 1989) conceptualize family in one of three ways: (1) structurally
based on form, (2) functionally based on function, or (3) transactionally based on interaction. Structural definitions rely on specific criteria (e.g., blood ties, law) to determine family membership (Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1994; Floyd, Mikkelson, & Judd, 2006). For example, the U.S. Census (2010) claims a family “consists of two or more people [one of whom is the householder] related by birth, marriage, or adoption, residing in the same housing unit,” and Andersen (1991) argues that the dominant North American ideology identifies a “real” family as the nuclear family, comprised of a heterosexual couple and their biological children. Specifically, Schneider’s (1980) research found that many individuals privilege blood-ties, especially those that unite parents and children. In fact, he argues that “real”, “true”, “blood” or “by birth” relationships can never be severed and cannot be lost given that each parent provides one half of the child’s “biological constitution” (p. 24). This common conception of family has become so embedded in accounts of biology that Bernardes (1999) claims that critical evaluations of the family have been largely unthinkable by many sociologists. In addition, Nelkin and Lindee (1995) as well as Baxter et al. (2009) argue that America’s focus on biology and law has garnered unprecedented support from researchers, policy makers and the general population at large.

This presumption that biology and law defines what it means to be family still resonates in more current literature (e.g., Baxter et al., 2009) that suggests that parent-child relationships lacking blood or legal ties often face some sort of social stigma (see Goffman, 1963). For example, adoption research reveals that not only do birth mothers face social stigma (Baxter et al., 2012b) for giving their child up for adoption (i.e., relinquishing the legal tie), but also adoptees and adoptive parents express feeling stigmatized (Baxter et al., 2012a).

Given this emphasis on the enduring quality of genetics in parent-child relationships and the gravitas of the law, it might come as no surprise that families are often considered nonvoluntary (Hess, 2000). Specifically, Hess positions the family as a
relationship where the people involved believe that they have “no viable choice but to maintain it” (p. 460). Dainton and Zelley (2006) argue that it is counterintuitive to actively work to maintain a relationship that is bound by blood because these relationships have no possibility of ending. The privileging of blood-ties, enmeshment in a kinship organization and legal institutions (e.g., adoption, marriage, step-families) provide a basis for many scholars to argue that family is not a choice but rather an obligatory life-long relationship (e.g. McAdoo, 2007; Petronio & Durham, 2008; Serewicz, 2006; Yoshimura, 2006.) Consequently, parent-child estrangement, on its face, resists the dominant American perception of family and ultimately is an interesting phenomenon that is rarely afforded any scholarly attention (Agliias, 2011a).

Although structural definitions dominate research literature and policy, functional and transactional definitions are sometimes used to illuminate different facets of familial relationships. For example, functional definitions rely heavily on the tasks members perform. Segrin and Flora (2011) contend that functional definitions, “view family as at least one adult and one or more other persons who perform certain tasks of the family life such as socialization, nurturance, development, and financial and emotional support” (p. 6). Baxter et al. (2009) suggest that functional definitions afford more flexibility than structural definitions but still tend to privilege reproduction and child-rearing (e.g., Reiss, 1980); what Floyd, Mikkelson, and Judd (2006) depict as a biological/genetic focus. In addition to structural and functional definitions, a third approach to defining family is transactional, or an emphasis on the communication among individuals and the subjective feelings generated by interaction (Segrin & Flora, 2011). Baxter et al. (2009) argue that transactional definitions emphasize the role communication plays in constituting what it means to be a family. They explain, “Relationships are familial, according to this approach, to the extent that members feel and act like a family” (p. 172). This transactional definition has strong implications for family estrangement in the sense that communication practices have the power to both make and break a familial relationship.
Although many researchers tend to privilege structural definitions and view family as a nonvoluntary relationship, certain scholars across multiple disciplines are beginning to problematize the traditional definition of family. For example, Stacey (1997) argues that “No longer is there a single culturally dominant family pattern, like the ‘modern’ one, to which a majority of citizens conform and most of the rest aspire” (p. 7). Instead, Stacey contends that the postmodern family is characterized by a variety of arrangements, which are constantly changing across the lifespan. Thus, a postmodern family is one that exemplifies the contentious, ambivalent, fluid nature of contemporary family culture and invites the possibility of different family formations. In addition, Braithwaite et al. (2010) recently conducted a study delineating a typology of voluntary kin. Their findings reveal that “voluntary kin as substitute family after the estrangement of family members” is one of the four main types of voluntary kin relationships. In particular their findings suggest that individuals may begin to communicatively construct new families after they dissolve family relationships most likely established by legal and blood ties. Therefore, family estrangement might serve as a catalyst for individuals to “choose” their own family and reap the benefits of relationships that provide social support and social capital.

In sum, taking a constitutive view in defining family and family estrangement might not only increase our understanding of both concepts but also promote the development and legitimation of alternative family forms. In line with structural definitions, Floyd, Mikkelson, & Judd (2006) suggest, genetics holds a prominent place in our understanding of family. Crabb & Augoutinos (2008) go as far as to claim that the idea of genetics establishes biological reproduction as the norm and any alternative as deviant. Yet, in the case of family estrangement, biology and the law (in the case of adoption) fail to anchor the relationship. Thus, the concept of family estrangement works to actively challenge the importance of blood and legal ties in the meaning of family.
Research Questions

The following research questions provide a guide to explore the communicative practices adult child employ to accomplish and maintain distance with a parent or parents as well as the communicative practices used to disclose and sustain the estrangement to other members of the immediate family, extended family, and social network. These questions serve as the foundation for a program of research to explore the understudied, yet important, phenomenon of family estrangement. In light of the potential contributions to a variety of literatures, and framed by Galvin’s (2006) discourse dependence perspective, the following research questions are posed:

**RQ1**: How do adult children communicatively (a) accomplish and (b) maintain distance with the target parent(s)? (internal boundary management)

**RQ2**: How do adult children communicatively (a) disclose and (b) sustain their estrangement from a parent(s) to other family members and to social network members such as friends and co-workers? (external boundary management)

Taken together, the answers to these two research questions have the potential to illuminate the ways discourse dependent families manage internal and external boundaries in the context of parent-child estrangement.
CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

Rationale for Research Methodology

As addressed in the review of literature, existing research on family estrangement, and parent-child estrangement in particular, is virtually nonexistent despite findings suggesting that it can be a significant family disruption (Agllias, 2011a; Dattilio & Nichols, 2011; Winters, Stinchfield, Lee, & Latimer, 2008). In addition to the negative consequences family estrangement can have on individuals’ well-being, we also know that it is becoming increasingly more prevalent, as evidenced by rises in allegations and reports in both clinical and legal settings (Bala, Hunt & McCarney, 2010; Jaffe, Ashbourne, & Mamo, 2010). Although existing research provides some insight into why estrangement occurs and associated deleterious outcomes, previous research fails to address what communicative practices constitute estrangement and how individuals manage information about this disruption with other social network members, including immediate and extended family members. Thus, the present study qualitatively seeks to build upon the dearth of literature surrounding the process of family estrangement by exploring, in rich detail, how adult children accomplish and maintain their estrangement with a parent or parents and how, if at all, they manage this information with other family and social network members.

For the purposes of the present study, a qualitative approach is appropriate given the theoretical framework and research questions posed. As articulated in Chapter one, Galvin’s discourse dependence perspective, based on social constructionism, centers language use as the mechanism that constitutes what it means to be a family. Consequently, communication practices have constitutive force and enable adult children to deconstruct their familial relationships. Given the focus on meaning and language use, it becomes very important to study the communicative practices adult children enact to accomplish and maintain distance with a parent or parents. Rubin and Rubin (1995)
explain not all methods are appropriate given the researcher’s worldview. In this regard, a qualitative research method was not chosen for the method’s sake, but rather was informed by the theoretical perspective that served as a foundation for the research questions.

Research questions, guided by theory, should ultimately dictate the methodology (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) explain: “Research questions articulate the researcher’s expectations [emphasis original]. Research questions are open-ended probes that, with the benefit of theoretical reasoning and some scene casing, orient the investigator’s interest to the scene” (p. 88). These research questions should emerge from the literature review and leave room for the researcher to interpret the qualities of the social phenomenon in concert with the tenets of an interpretive approach (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Researchers adopting an interpretive perspective believe in multiple realities according to the relative positioning of an individual or group (Deetz, 2001; Lindlof & Taylor). Deetz (2001) explains, “The expressed goal of many interpretive studies is to show how particular realities are socially produced and maintained through ordinary talk, stories, rites, rituals, and other daily activities” (p. 23). Researchers appropriating an interpretive worldview, seek to put emergent observations and interpretations in conversation with theory (Anderson, 2001), in this instance, Galvin’s (2006) discourse dependence perspective.

Interpretive researchers also focus on questions that privilege the perspective of the native, in this case adult children who are estranged from their parent(s) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In-depth qualitative interviewing is one effective way to garner the adult children’s point of view. Researchers also conduct interviews because seek to elicit open-ended responses (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Overall, Rubin & Rubin (1995) contend that qualitative interviews require researchers to listen closely, to respect and have curiosity for what people say, and to have a systematic method of hearing and understanding what individuals tell them.
In qualitative interviews, participants typically speak for themselves and express what they think or how they feel about their social world. In other words, interviews are merely guided conversations (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). When selecting respondents, it is common practice for scholars to choose individuals who have been through the critical events or experiences pertaining to the phenomenon of interest. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) argue that those people are likely to provide the most evocative accounts. Thus, qualitative interviews will allow me to solicit evocative reports of communication practices from the individuals who enacted them.

In addition, Rubin and Rubin (1995) contend, “Qualitative interviewing is appropriate when the purpose of the research is to unravel complicated relationships” (p. 51). As discussed, family estrangement might be very complicated based on a variety of factors including the reason for estrangement in the first place (see Carr et al., 2011). Yet, researchers might employ one of many interviewing practices. Because they allow individuals to share their experience in a way that is comfortable to them, I specifically chose narrative interviews.

**Narrative Interviews**

Narrative interviews, or what Langellier (1989) describes as personal narrative interviews, are the least structured of all the interview techniques particularly due to the fact that they are intended to allow participants to tell their stories their way. In order to provide the participant the freedom to narrate, the researcher should help facilitate the discussion while attempting to avoid constraining the participant. Narrative interviewing provided the adult children with the means to construct the beginning, middle, and end of the estrangement process as it unfolded over time.

Furthermore, making sense of relationship dissolution is often accomplished when participants tell their story to others (Harvey, Weber, & Orbuch, 1990). For the purpose of this study, a narrative is an account and a construction of what that account was like to the individuals involved (Herman, 2009). Herman (2009) explains, “Narrative, in other
words, is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change” (p. 2). In particular, Bochner, Ellis, and Tillmann-Healy (1998) contend that narrative stories are a way to explore how individuals cope with exceptional crises, deviate from the norm, and create new ways of communicating experience when traditional convention fails them. In addition, research suggests that stories enable individuals to make sense of their lives and to create logic and sequence out of complex and messy events (Becker, 1997; Koenig Kellas, 2008). Ochs and Capps (2001) claim that stories function, “to imbue life events with a temporal and logical order, to demystify them and establish coherence across past, present, and as yet unrealized experience” (p. 21). Consequently, soliciting a narrative should help facilitate sense making in light of the story teller’s family difficulties (Koenig Kellas, 2005). Because family estrangement might be an especially complex and emotional experience, story-telling serves as a way for participants to discuss the communication practices they enacted in context with their estrangement experience.

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggest that qualitative narrative interviews are an excellent way to capture the stories in which individuals construct their experiences through language use. Holmberg, Orbuch, and Veroff (2004) explain:

Since the late 1980s, social scientists have been collecting and interpreting the stories individuals tell about their lives and relationships. This narrative approach [emphasis in the original], in which scholars investigate participants’ stories in their own words, has become an important part of the social sciences. (p. 4).

Thus, narratives served as a way for the adult children to constitute a picture of the estrangement process.

Narrative as Epistemology

Although narrative interviews served as an appropriate method to collect data, it is important to emphasize that the narratives are, in fact, a method. Koenig Kellas (2008) argues that taking a narrative approach means different things to different scholars. Some scholars approach the study of narrative by applying a narrative theory. For example,
Langellier (1989) attends to the performance of narratives and Bochner and his colleagues (1997) argue that relationships are narratives. These approaches position narrative as ontology. As Koenig Kellas (2008) describes, “that is, narrative constitutes our way of being in the world and is conceived as knowledge set against social and historical backgrounds” (p. 245). Scholars who treat narrative ontologically contend that narratives are inseparable from the ways we understand relationships.

Scholars might also relate to narrative epistemologically. In other words, researchers might treat narrative as a form of data analysis. For the purposes of this study, narrative interviews are a methodological tool that enabled me to garner evocative detail about a negative parent-child relationship. Treating narrative as epistemology, then, means that narratives served as method to explore another communication phenomenon. In particular, I collected semi-structured interviews where narrative descriptions emerge in the interviews. My treatment of narrative aligns with Holmberg, Orbuch, and Veroff, (2004) who used narrative interviews to explore how individuals and couples came to make sense of their emerging romantic relationship.

In addition to the narrative interview, which captured the participants’ story chapter by chapter, I supplemented the data collection with semi-structured questions designed to evoke detailed reactions about the estrangement experience. Semi-structured questions allow for flexibility, which is important when conducting qualitative interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

**Pilot Interviewing**

Prior to conducting the present study, a pilot test was conducted to assess the face validity (i.e., what was clear and what was unclear) in the interview protocol. Specifically, six interviews were collected, five that were in person and one that was conducted via telephone. These participants were recruited via snowball sampling (originating with personal social network members). All of the pilot participants were Caucasian, all were residents of the Midwest, and two-thirds were female. Interviews
lasted for approximately 40-60 minutes but were not recorded or transcribed to protect the pilot participants’ identities and privacy nor was I interested in the content of their responses as the interviews did not provide data for the study. After each interview, the protocol was edited, sometimes resulting in the addition of semi-structured interview questions and one time resulting in the addition of a visual aid (see description of Holmberg et al., 2004 and detailed description of procedure in Data Collection).

Specifically, pilot participants occasionally focused on sharing the details of their negative relationship at the expense of detailing the communication practices that facilitated the process of their estrangement. The visual aid helped the participants recall and focus on describing their communication practices but still allowed them to parse out the details of their negative relationship as it unfolded over time.

In addition to assessing face validity, participants reported their level of comfort with not only the questions I asked but also their level of comfort with the interview overall. Participants reported that all of the questions were sensitive to their situation and relationship with their parent or parents. They also reported that although they felt some negatively valanced emotions (e.g., sadness or anger) when answering some of the questions, the overall experience was not overly distressing. Given that some participants appeared visibly upset (e.g., crying) when talking about certain aspects of the estrangement process, I provided them with information about the University of Iowa counseling service (in the event they were affiliated with the University) or with the following link: http://www.findapsychologist.org/ at the end of the interview. Findapsychologist.org is a website that helps individuals connect with licensed and accredited psychologists and is associated with the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology. In order to help protect my pilot participants’ face (see Goffman, 2005), they were informed that providing counseling information was a part of my institutional review board (i.e., ethics committee) protocol. Providing the University
Research Participants

Participant Eligibility Criteria

In order to participate in the present study, participants must have met the following criteria: (1) are at least 18 years of age, (2) have a negative relationship with a parent or parents, and (3) have distanced themselves from the parent(s) as a result of that negative relationship. Because the context of this study is parent-child estrangement, adult children who have distanced themselves from a parent or parents were recruited as participants. Although parents who have distanced themselves from a child or children could have also served as participants, existing research (e.g., Carr et al., 2011) suggests that parents are typically the subjects of the estrangement (i.e., the children are the initiators) and often cannot even determine why their children have sought to distance themselves, let alone the maintenance strategies their children use to solidify the distance. Given the aim of this study is to explore the ways distance is accomplished and maintained, I narrowed the participant pool to those adult children initiators, who were more likely to be able to account for their distancing behaviors.

Participant Recruitment

Before recruitment, the University of Iowa Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the present study (see Appendix A). Because there are no official statistics surrounding family estrangement and because it might have been difficult to find this population, I planned to employ multiple recruiting strategies. First, the research call was sent to all students, faculty, and staff via the University of Iowa email listserv. This call resulted in a large number of qualified participants, so many that I did not need to employ any other recruitment strategies. In the event I did not find enough participants through the listserv I planned to e-mail support groups located via Internet search about the possibility of either speaking with them directly or to see if they would be willing to
disseminate my research call (e.g., Adult Children Estranged From Their Parents: http://www.dailystrength.org/groups/adult-children-estranged-from-their-parents). Third, I planned to post the research call on two websites dedicated to estranged individuals (e.g., http://www.estrangedstories.com/). Finally, I had planned to advertise using the Craigslist volunteer category in major U.S. cities. Again, due to the immense number of willing participants, I only collected data from those participants who received my call via the listserv.

Individuals who responded to the research call were screened for eligibility. Those who qualified arranged a time to meet for an in-depth interview. Scheduling was conducted at the participant’s convenience and interviews were conducted in person or via telephone depending on geographical distance. Typically, interviews were scheduled within one day after initial contact. Once the interview date was scheduled, participants were asked to fill out an online survey before the interview date. The survey questionnaire included informational questions about the adult children, their parents, and their social network (see Data Collection for more detail) in addition to demographic questions (see Appendix B). This information allowed me to describe the sample and provided me with relevant information to frame the interview. A total of 52 in-depth interviews were collected over a 30-day period, although 43 of those interviews were collected within the first 11 days. Because saturation can only be determined in retrospect and in order to conduct verification procedure purposes, I continued to collect data beyond what I expected was the point of theoretical saturation. Corbin and Strauss (2008) define saturation as the point, “when no new categories or relevant themes are emerging” (p. 148). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) contend that saturation is a point where the observations no longer surprise the researcher and concepts and propositions are consistently confirmed by the data. In other words, saturation is the point where the data becomes repetitious and new data affirms established patterns.

Participant Information
Participants included adult children currently residing in a Midwestern state. Of the 52 participants, 32 (61.5%) identified that they had a negative relationship with one parent, 18 identified both parents (34.6%), and two identified more than two parents (3.8%) (see Appendix C). Participants who identified more than two parents included both their biological parents and a stepparent. Overall, 35 mothers, 36 fathers, two step-mothers, and one step-father were identified as the people with whom the participants had a negative relationship. Corresponding to those parent or parents, two participants (3.8%) reported having regular contact, 17 (32.7%) reported having some contact, nine (17.3%) reported having hardly any contact, and 24 (46.2%) reported having no contact. The majority of participants (n=35, 79.5%) indicated their desire for distance was unidirectional (i.e. they wanted distance and their parent did not), although some participants indicated that they were not exactly sure whether their parents sought distance or not. On average, participants began the distancing process at age 21 and those participants who have been able to maintain distance, reported being able to do so for an average of nine years. Participants who characterized their negative relationship with a parent or parents as on-again/off-again, reported being able to do so for an average of 15 years.

Participants’ ages ranged from 20-66 with a mean age of 35.73 (SD=11.05), with 36 identifying as women (70.6%), and 15 identifying as men (29.4%). The sample was largely Caucasian (n=48, 94.1%), with one participant who reported an American Indian or Alaskan Native (2.0%) ethnicity, two who reported an Asian (3.9%) ethnicity, one who reported a Black or African American (2.0%) ethnicity, and four who reported a Hispanic or Latino (7.8%) ethnicity (participants were able to select multiple ethnicities). One participant chose not to identify his gender or ethnicity on the survey but I subsequently identified him as a Caucasian man after the in-person interview. Educational background varied, with six participants reporting high school, 15 reporting an Associates degree, 15 reporting a Bachelor’s degree, 10 reporting a Master’s degree,
and six reporting a Doctorate/Professional degree to be the highest level of completed education received. The majority of participants (n= 37) reported that they have sought general counseling in the past and 21.6% (n=11) reported currently seeking counseling. Moreover, 5.9% (n=3) reported that they had considered counseling but have not gone.

Finally, participants varied in terms of whether and with whom they have discussed their negative parental relationship. Accordingly, 55.8% (n=29) of the participants have discussed the negative parental relationship with whom they perceive the negative relationship; 90.4% (n=47) of the participants have discussed the negative relationship with their parent(s) with another member of their immediate family; 53.8% (n=28) have discussed the negative relationship with their parent(s) with another member of their extended family; 82.3% (n=43) have discussed the relationship with at least one member of their social network; and one participant indicated that she had never discussed the negative relationship with anyone until the interview.

**Data Collection: In-Depth Interviewing**

Before the interview, participants completed an online questionnaire, which included elements of informed consent as well as the solicitation of demographic information and information pertaining to their negative relationship with their parent or parents (see Appendix C). Questions included topics such as identifying the person or persons with whom they have a negative relationship, whether the adult child has contact with the parent or parents, and the timeline of the estrangement (i.e., how long have they maintained distance from their parent or parents). Participants were free to leave any questions unanswered. Before the interview began, participants were able to ask any questions about the questionnaire, the research study, or about me (see Appendix D with detail to follow), although no participants had any questions about any of those topics.

Because interpretive researchers value the native’s perspective, participants were asked to think of themselves as an author of a novel. In concert with a similar narrative
approach to data collection (see Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2004), participants were instructed:

Today, I’m going to ask you to tell me the story of how you distanced yourself from the relationship with your [mom and/or dad]. I’m going to ask that you think of yourself as the author of a novel. There’s no right way to tell your story but I am interested in hearing about it from the beginning and then step-by-step ... or we can think of everything you did as a different chapter of the novel.

This prompt encouraged the participants to communicatively construct an account in light of their own experience and later in response to the interviewer’s questions.

In addition to asking participants to think of themselves as authors of a novel, each participant was engaged in a storyboarding technique. As indicated by the pilot research, participants were sometimes uncertain how to begin their narrative when the prompt was left completely open-ended, or had some difficulty focusing on the communication practices that constituted the estrangement. Participants were instructed: “As you tell your story, please stop at the beginning of each chapter and let’s come up with a word or phrase to represent that chapter.” Participants were then able to write down a word or phrase on the sheet of paper to help them get started and that enabled them to focus on their distancing practices. This storyboarding technique provided participants with a structure (see Holberg et al., 2004) that they were able to reference as they continued to share their narrative.

Before participants were asked to describe their distancing behaviors, they were first asked to provide background about their negative relationship with a parent or parents. They were instructed:

Before we get started, can you tell me a little bit about your negative relationship with your [mom and/or dad]? We can think of this as the introduction to the novel, a way to provide context for what’s to come …

This allowed participants to “warm up” and provide a context for the distancing practices in which they engaged. Participants began their account wherever they wanted with reference to the warm-up question, providing them with the freedom to begin their story
their way. This opening question allowed the participants to construct their experience in story form, to mark the beginning of their story and to highlight meaningful experiences.

After the participants provided this contextual information, they were asked to think about “Chapter One” as the first communicative action they took to distance themselves from their parent or parents. Specifically, they were asked to think about what they did, how their parent or parents responded, how they felt, and whether anyone else knew what had happened. As argued in Chapter 1, parent-child relationships are interdependent so in order to achieve distance, adult children indicated that they voluntarily and intentionally distanced themselves. The first action they took, then, even if it was not talking to their parent (i.e., a lack of action), was directed toward their parent or parents and was salient to them. In other words, their actions did not happen by chance and became communicative practices in their execution. For example, participants described actively avoiding family gatherings that they had always been a part of in the past, communicating a disruption to the family ritual. In addition, even though some adult children talked about making decisions as their first action, they always included the way they enacted those decisions. A decision to move out of the house, then, was accompanied by the actual move. Thus, the enactments became the communicative practices that provide insight into how adult children distanced themselves, not simply that they distanced themselves.

In addition to the initial interview prompt, participants were instructed: “I’m also interested in the cast of characters. In other words, who else was present or who else did you talk to about distancing yourself from your [mom and/or dad]?” By asking participants to think of who else was involved and how they felt, participants often shared how their actions influenced and were influenced by other members of their family. Semi-structured and probe questions were asked throughout the interview to parse out additional information about the participants’ interactions with other family and social network members.
Participants then began filling in their narrative chapter by chapter (i.e., communicative practice by communicative practice) and labeling each chapter on their handout until the participant felt like there were no more chapters to tell. After participants indicated that their story was over by providing an exit strategy (e.g., “I guess that’s the end of my story”; Riessman, 2003), participants were asked if there were any parts of their story they would like to add to, edit, or re-tell. Participants were instructed: “Like any novelist, you can edit the chapters you have already written, either adding more or retelling certain sections, whenever and however you would like.” When participants indicated they were completely done, the remainder of the interview followed a semi-structured, focused interview format.

The semi-structured, focused interview format (Kvale, 1996; McCracken, 1998) was used to collect additional information about the adult children’s negative relationship and distancing practices. According to Rubin and Rubin (1995) semi-structured interviewing should be flexible and allow for each interview to provide an account salient to the participants. Therefore, even though I had some potential questions prepared (guided by my pilot interviews), the ordering of those questions and sometimes even the content of the questions depended on each participant’s narrative account, the details of that account, and the responsiveness of the participant.

The content of the semi-structured interview questions included issues such as information management, social support-seeking strategies, perceived social support, privacy management concerns, and a desire to reconcile. Questions pertaining to these topics were asked by using: (1) experience, (2) example, (3) emergent idea, (4) compare-contrast, and (5) loose-ends questions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Spradley, 1980).

Specifically, experience questions (e.g., What is it like to talk about your negative relationship with others?) get at the participants’ experience of social reality. Example questions (e.g., “Has your desire to distance yourself influenced any of your other relationships?”) elicit a “for instance” response. Emergent idea questions (e.g., “Are you
concerned about what other people might think about what is happening?”) help the researcher gain insight into participants’ potential reaction to an anticipated judgment about how others perceive them (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

In addition, participants were asked to reflect on what chapters, if any, they would like to rewrite if given the chance. This question served as a way for participants to express regrets or salient lessons learned both within and outside of their control. Next, participants were asked to compare their distancing behaviors with their parent or parents with a romantic break-up or friendship dissolution. This type of questioning is what Lindlof and Taylor (2002) classify as compare-contrast questions (“How is distancing yourself from a parent the same or different as breaking up with a romantic partner or a friend?”). Some more sensitive questions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; “Do you ever see yourself reconciling?”) were reserved for later in the interview. For example, participants were asked a series of questions about family estrangement: what it means to them, whether they perceive it as good or bad, and how they characterize their own parent-child relationship. Loose-ends questions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) such as, “Is there anything else you would like to tell me?” and probes such as “How so?” and “Can you tell me a little bit more about that?” were asked to elicit more detail about both the narrative account and the answers to the semi-structured interview questions. These loose-ends questions were asked after every chapter the participant identified. Researchers often use loose-ends questions at the end of the interview to avoid disrupting the flow of the conversation. Finally, participants were asked what advice they would provide to other individuals or other families in similar situations. This question served as a way for participants to reflect on their own sense-making surrounding their negative relationship as well as potentially provide others experiencing a similar situation with social support.

Interviews ranged from 15 minutes to 112 minutes with a mean and median length of 47 minutes. After the interview, participants were asked whether they would be
willing to read some of the study results (see verification procedures below). A list of willing participants was then compiled and set aside until the data analysis was complete.

Data Analysis

Pragmatic Transcription and Data Management

All interviews, with the approval of the participants, were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Written notes were also taken during the interview, including the word or phrases the participants used to label each chapter of their story. Audio recordings were uploaded to a computer and transcribed using ExpressScribe transcription software and Microsoft Word. Due to the large number of interviews collected within the first two weeks, the transcription process did not begin until data collection was complete- one month after I began collection. In addition, I replaced all identifying information with pseudonyms in concert with my IRB application in order to protect the privacy of my participants. This process included replacing any names and locations with fictitious names for people or place markers (e.g., [state]) for locations. In order to immerse myself in the data, I transcribed seven interviews past the point of saturation (i.e., 25) for a total of 32 interviews. Because saturation is determined retrospectively, I wanted to make certain that no new themes emerged before I had two independent third parties transcribe the remaining 18 and two interviews, respectively. Transcription resulted in 682 pages of single-spaced text. This process also served as the first level of analysis. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002):

Transcribing also allows the researcher to listen to the interview in a more studied way. One can attend more closely to conversation and pick up certain themes, issues, or contradictions that may [sic] not have been noticed in real time. Thus, transcribing can serve as portal to the process of data analysis (p. 205).

Given the amount and length of the interviews, the transcription process took a month but, as Lindlof and Taylor argue, helped me to begin recognizing themes.
Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a “method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data” (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 79). According to Braun and Clark (2006), thematic analysis requires researchers to ask themselves a variety of questions, typically surrounding the question of what is a theme? They argue that a theme captures a particularly salient aspect of the data in a patterned way regardless of whether that theme captures the majority experience. Bodgen and Biklen (1982) contend that a theme is a trend, a concept that emerges from the data that coalesces into an intelligible concept or key distinction. Therefore, instead of asking questions of quantity, researchers engaged in thematic analysis ask whether a set of data speaks to or answers the research question in a meaningful way (Braun & Clark, 2006). Another important consideration is whether to conduct an essentialist or constructionist thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). Essentialist analyses might focus on participant motivations whereas constructionist thematic analyses are more concerned with sociocultural contexts and individual accounts. Given the theoretical framework, this analysis would be classified as a constructionist thematic analysis that produced manifest and latent themes. According to Braun and Clark, manifest themes are those that convey the surface meaning of the data. Manifest themes emerge explicitly from what the participant says or writes. Alternatively, latent, or interpretive themes are organized to elucidate the significance of the patterns that emerge. They identify the “underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations – and ideologies – that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (p. 84). Put differently, latent themes require interpretive work where the researcher must identify the features that contribute to its meaning and form. For example, the practice “I Responded to Reconciliation Attempts” emerged from participant accounts of trying to both avoid and refuse attempts as reconciliation.
Specifically, Braun and Clark’s thematic analysis method, which is an iterative process consisting of the following six steps, was conducted: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating coding categories, (3) generating themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) locating exemplars. For the purposes of this study, becoming familiar with the data consisted of reading and re-reading the data and taking note of initial ideas. Becoming familiar with the data was also achieved during the transcription process.

Generating initial codes required coding interesting features of the data in a systematic way and then collating the data pertinent to each code. Generating initial coding categories was facilitated by the salient words and phrases participants used to label the chapters of their story. In fact, many initial codes were directly derived from the chapter names the participants indicated. For example, the practice name “I Stood Up For Others/Became an Activist” was derived from a participant who explained, “So everything fell into place and I became an activist” (#34). In addition, initial coding categories were derived when I identified the communication practices the participants talked about within a given chapter. Put simply, in order to answer the first research question, I marked every time a participant identified a new practice that helped them accomplish or maintain distance with their parents. This process was repeated for the second research question, but the focus was redirected towards identifying the ways adult children presented and reinforced their estrangement to members of their social network.

Next, generating themes required the researcher to collate the initial codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to the particular theme. Generating themes is an iterative process that requires the researcher to take the initial codes and organize them into broader themes. In other words, codes serve as the building blocks for themes, which emerge when the researcher combines them in different ways. As I analyzed the data, I treated the narrative as the unit of analysis. In this regard, a single sentence could contain multiple codes or themes and a single theme could gain expression in several
sentences. Braun and Clark (2006) argue that although some initial codes might go on to merge as a main theme, others might form subthemes (i.e., themes within a theme), and others might be discarded. They explain that there is no “hard-and-fast answer to what proportion of your data set needs to display evidence of the theme for it to be considered a theme” (p. 11). Therefore, a theme was generated when it spoke to the research questions posed regardless of whether it was identified by numerous participants. This process yields a collection of potential themes and subthemes and all extracts of the data pertinent to them. For example, the practice “Legal Name Change” emerged from an initial code by the same name whereas the practice “I Told Them it Was Over” coalesced from the initial codes “Verbal Denouncement” and “Written Denouncement.” Furthermore, the theme “I Delivered an Ultimatum” was given voice by multiple participants whereas only one participant identified the theme “Legal Emancipation.”

Taken together, each theme spoke to one of the research questions and provided an evocative account of the communicative practices enacted by adult children estranged from a parent or parents.

Reviewing themes is the process of checking whether the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set. Braun and Clark (2006) argue that this is an iterative process where some potential themes will dissipate if there is not enough data to support them, some will collapse into each other, and some might be broken down into separate themes. The iterative process of reviewing themes requires two level of refinement. The first level involves the researcher reviewing at the level of the coded exemplars. This requires the researcher to read the exemplars and confirm that they cohere into a given theme. If the themes are not coherent, the research must decide whether the theme itself is problematic or whether some of the exemplars are inappropriate. Depending on the answer, the researcher should abandon or rework the theme. Once the themes satisfy the researcher, level two requires the researcher to then determine whether the themes reflect the meanings evident in the data set as a whole
(Braun & Clark). Again, the researcher needs to re-read the data to make sure the themes work in relation to the data set and to determine what, if anything, needs to be re-coded. As Braun and Clark describe, “when your refinements are not adding anything substantial, stop!” (p. 92). As a result, the researcher should have a reasonably adequate idea of the different themes, how they fit together, and how they form a story about the data.

Finally, step five, defining and naming themes, consists of determining the heart of what each theme conveys: knowing what it is and what it is not. This step yields clear definitions and names for each theme. Labels should be concise and immediately tell the reader what the theme is about. Finally, locating exemplars requires the researcher to make a selection of rich, compelling examples that provide evidence of the theme and relates to the research question.

Data Presentation and Verification Procedures

According Lincoln and Guba (1985) data should be transferrable. Transferability refers to the similarity between two contexts (Lincoln & Guba) and can only be determined when a context is described in such evocative detail or thick description (see Geertz, 1973) that others can recognize this context as similar to or different from their own. In order to present an evocative account of the adult children’s social realities, exemplars of their experience were flagged as illustrations of the findings. In particular, extracting rich exemplars is a necessity for researchers who seek to demonstrate their familiarity with the data and competence as data analysts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). They go on to explain the characteristics of the exemplar:

This term describes self-contained depictions of events that are vivid, fine-grained, and dense with significance …They are fragments that ‘stand for’ a larger phenomenon by demonstrating its practical dimensions. Because they are evocative, exemplars also stimulate readers to consider what is being demonstrated and this anticipate the writer’s impeding interpretation (p. 297). With this in mind, exemplars were chosen when they clearly depicted a theme or supported a claim about the data. Often, these exemplars were both lengthy and detailed.
In addition to presenting evocative exemplars, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that qualitative researchers should verify the trustworthiness of their data. Specifically, researchers should be held to the following three standards: (1) credibility, (2) dependability, and (3) confirmability (see descriptions below). Lincoln and Guba argue that credibility is an internal check of the data and can be determined in multiple ways. To ascertain whether this analysis is valid and meets the standards of credibility, three interrelated verification procedures were conducted: (1) referential adequacy, (2) member checking, and (3) peer-debriefing (Lincoln & Guba).

*Referential adequacy* is achieved by archiving the second half of the data set until the first half is analyzed. The second half of the data is then analyzed in comparison to the first half. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe, referential adequacy requires that the researchers put aside a portion of their data until tentative findings have been reached. As they argue:

> Skeptics not associated with the inquiry can use such materials to satisfy themselves that the findings and interpretations are meaningful by testing them directly and personally against the archived and still ‘raw’ data. A more compelling demonstration can hardly be imagined (p. 313).

Because I had 52 interviews, half (n=26) of the interviews were set aside before I started data analysis. Because I reached saturation at 25 (before I ran out of data), referential adequacy was a viable procedure. Specifically, I first read, and re-read, the second half of the data set. Then, I thematically analyzed the second half of the data set, identifying initial codes and combining them into themes. After this process was complete, I compared my analysis with the first 26 interviews to my analysis with interviews 27-52. Although named a little differently (e.g., Went to Counseling versus Assisted by Counselor), the second half of the data did not yield any theme that was not already identified in the first half of the data. After the process was complete, I choose the name of the theme that best represented the data and combined exemplars so that I could ultimately present the most evocative illustrations of the theme.
Another form of qualitative research validation is *member checking* (i.e., the practice to determining whether the analysis “rings true” for the native; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking is a form of triangulation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) and is often used to validate qualitative data. Conducting member-checking procedures is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba). In this regard, researchers able to claim with more confidence that that their reconstructions are recognizable to their audience as representations of their own realities. To ensure that the analysis resonates with the participants, participants were asked whether they would be willing to review my data. Of the 49 participants who agreed, about twenty percent (10 participants) were randomly sampled to review my analysis. The analysis included an overview of my findings, data exemplars, and my interpretation of that data. All of participants who checked my analysis commented that the findings resonated with the majority of their experience, often commenting that my conclusions were “spot on” and “reflect my sentiments well.”

Finally, in order to ensure credibility, detailed notes were made available to another trained interpretive researcher. This researcher provided an external check to ensure that observations and interpretations of the data are valid on their face. In other words, the interpretive researcher must show how they came to their conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process is known as *peer debriefing*, and is a form of investigator triangulation. Lincoln and Guba explain that peer debriefing serves multiple purposes. First, the process helps keep researchers honest by exposing them to someone who is asking substantive, methodological, and ethical questions in a way that forces the researchers to be aware of the they play. Second, debriefing offers researchers the chance to explain their findings in way that forces them to clearly articulate themselves. Third, debriefing allows researchers to chance to develop the next steps in emerging methodological design. Finally, debriefing affords the primary researcher with the opportunity to clear his/her mind and retain their good judgment (Lincoln & Guba).
complete the peer debriefing process, I engaged with another colleague who was well versed in thematic analysis. During the procedure, I presented this colleague with a sample of my data and asked her to perform an analysis.

Given the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis, sometimes the person who did my peer debriefing and I made sense of the data differently. For example, we might have labeled a communicative practice using different terms (e.g., “I told them off” versus “I told them it was over”). To remedy this discrepancy, I discussed with her, in-depth, how I chose to label the communicative practices based on the native’s language. Guided by the native’s voice, she and I negotiated some of communicative practice labels until we reached an agreement. For example, the communicative practice “I stood up for others/became an activist” emerged from a discussion of how participants invoked both phrases when talking about how they maintained distance. Another negotiation emerged when she and I categorized communicative practices into different supra-themes. For example, the communicative practice “I told my story to others” might have been either a way to maintain the distance or as a way to disclose the estrangement. Again, we negotiated this difference in framing by closely examining the native’s language to determine how the practice would be categorized (see Kayla’s explanation of how sharing her story helped maintain the distance). In the end, her analysis verified the integrity of my findings and validated organization of the data.

**Dependability** is another important part of the verification process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that credibility is meaningless without dependability in the same way validity cannot exist without reliability. In qualitative research, researchers must be able to show how they came to their findings. In order to do this, others must be able to track the ways their processes informed their observations (Lincoln & Guba). This requires that the method of analysis is transparent. In other words, the researcher must be able to show how they got from point A to point B. Thus, dependability was achieved when I discussed with another qualitatively trained researcher the process of how the themes
emerged. This independent third party helped to ensure that my methods were dependable.

Finally, in order to achieve confirmability, I engaged in a process known as the audit trail. Throughout the process, detailed notes were kept which aided in selecting rich illustrations of the practices that will be discussed in the Results chapter (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By detailing a systematic process of analysis, researchers attempt to provide a link (i.e., audit trail) between their data and their findings. In labeling exemplars in such a way that they are traceable to the original interview transcripts, researchers can also provide sound, logical, and virtually transparent accounts of their analysis process. In many instances, this was achieved by asking participants to label the chapters of their stories. These titles served as a way to help organize the emergent themes. These audit trail practices, taken together, also help ensure that the researcher meets the criterion of confirmability. In light of the verification procedures performed, I now present the findings that resulted from the analysis of the data.
CHAPTER THREE
DATA ANALYSIS:
INTERNAL BOUNDARY MANAGEMENT

Context for Findings

The present findings are organized by the first research question posed in chapter one: How do adult children communicatively (a) accomplish and (b) maintain distance with the target parent(s)? In order to answer this research question, I analyzed the data in accordance with the methods described in chapter two. Specifically, I detail the communicative actions adult children took to distance themselves from their parents (from most prevalent to least prevalent). Overall, three supra-themes emerged that help organize the data: declarative practices, one-time practices, and continuous practices (see Appendix E). Results suggest that individuals enacted a variety of combinations or “pathways” in order to both accomplish and maintain distance (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Pathways to Estrangement
As discussed in chapter one, estrangement is a process where those involved might find themselves at different points along the continuum. Some adult children enacted *declarative practices* to help establish themselves at the far end of the estrangement continuum. As it happens, the communicative practices detailed as a part of this supra-theme are those first typically enacted by the adult child to create and maximize distance, or to at least directly communicate with the parent or parents that the relationship had changed. Those adult children who enacted these behaviors either confronted their parent directly or relied on a third party (e.g., family, the government) to accomplish the distance. Although the participants might have later moved away from severe estrangement down the continuum to being less estranged, these first actions were usually very effective in communicating the adult child’s desire for distance and actually accomplishing that distance. Nonetheless, even if the adult children began the estrangement process with a declarative practice, they still engaged in at least one of the continuous practices, although more often they enacted both one-time and continuous practices.

Specifically, *one-time practices* are those that adult children only had to enact once due to the nature of the action (e.g., moving away). *Continuous practices* are those that adult children engaged in repeatedly in order to move themselves along the estrangement continuum toward greater estrangement or at least to maintain the distance they were able to accomplish. Regardless, both communicative practices were enacted to accomplish and maintain distance simultaneously. In relationship to previous research, one-time and continuous practices more closely resemble what Davis (1973) termed the dissolution of “fading away” as opposed to the initial declarative practices that are metaphorically closer to “sudden death” dissolution. Yet, it is important to note that Davis’ dissolution metaphors fail to capture the extent to which adult children spent their time and energy maintaining the distance they were able to establish. Put differently,
even though participants described using declarative practices, they also always had to engage in at least one of the maintenance practices.

Although one-time and continuous practices could be enacted to both accomplish and maintain distance, as suggested, the emphasis on the practice enactment was centered on maintaining distance. In other words, even though a participant might have stopped talking to their parent to initially accomplish distance, the continuation of the silence (i.e., ceasing communication to maintain the distance) was the more constant and salient practice. Despite the fact that scholars typically conceptualize maintenance as a constellation of communicative practices that keep relationships together (e.g., Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2014), maintenance in estrangement works in the exact opposite way. Thus, participants reported having to actively enact both continuous and one-time practices to keep distance between themselves and their parent or parents.

The emphasis on maintenance suggests that, unlike voluntary relationships that dissolve, many adult children could not simply declare the relationship was over and move on from their parent or parents. Participants often felt like they needed to justify the practices they enacted to maintain distance because they felt guilty for violating the cultural norms of being a “good child.” Some participants encountered interference with the estrangement goal from immediate or extended family members. Consequently, for many participants, estrangement, although accomplished to some degree, appears to be a constant negotiation that requires tremendous communicative work. In fact, these communicative practices emphasize the ways in which estrangement is truly a process that might take a variety of paths as opposed to a binary in which an individual is either estranged or not. Now, I present and interpret these findings in detail before turning to chapter four: external boundary management.

**Declarative Practices**

Typically one of the first communicative practices employed by some participants, declarative practices were enacted to make it very clear that the adult
children desired distance with their parent or parents. Specifically, four communicative practices compose this supra-theme: (1) “I told them it was over”, (2) “I delivered an ultimatum, (3) “I sought third party intervention”, and (4) “I stood up for myself.” Below is an in-depth description and analysis of these four communicative practices.

“I Told Them It Was Over”

The communicative practice, “I told them it was over”, corresponds to what Baxter (1985) labeled as “Fait Accompli” in her study of relational dissolution. She conceptualized Fait Accompli as an “explicit declaration to the other party that the relationship was over with no opportunity for discussion or compromise” (p. 37). Most typically, adult children enacted the communicative practice of Fait Accompli by writing their parent a letter or e-mail, although some confronted their parents face-to-face.

Participants gave voice to this practice when they described telling their parent the relationship was over as a matter of fact. For example, before stopping communicating with her mother, one participant explains:

ELLIE: So, shortly after that, I, um, wrote my mother an email … I just told her that, you know, I didn’t feel that our relationship was working. I felt that it was destructive to me and that I was experiencing health side effects from it and that this is not something that I could have. And so, I just, I didn’t want her in my life anymore … “Like this responsibility I’m just not dealing with it anymore. You have to figure out how to survive without me” is essentially what I told her. “You are an adult. I am sorry this is happening to you, but I can’t do this anymore”. And, um, that was very liberating to me to stand up to her and say that and it was very liberating for me to be like enough is enough. I’m done taking this. (Interview #39)

This participant explained that she has had enough of her co-dependent relationship with her mother and that she needed some boundaries because she thought their relationship was unhealthy (“my blood pressure was off the charts”). She explained how she told her mother that the relationship was not working and that she did not want her in her life anymore. By delivering this message over e-mail, Ellie was able to express her desire for distance without any interruptions and by not reading her mothers’ e-mail responses (“she wrote me e-mails, um which I had them all routed to a special folder”) was able to
effectively close down the conversation and wait to read the e-mails when and if she is ready.

As it happens, many participants shared that they simply could not face their parent and thought that a letter provided them with more control over the situation. Lily explained, “I got out everything that I needed to tell him, like I'm better than writing things down than talking about my feelings” (Interview #15). For example, when asked what she did to accomplish distance with her mother, a participant recounts:

ZOE: Um, I wrote a letter to her. Um, because trying to have a face-to-face conversation with her wasn’t working and so, I wrote a letter. Um, and I basically told her that I was unhappy with the relationship we were having.

INTERVIEWER: What would you want to call this chapter?

ZOE: Um, um, something about a letter. I don’t know what I would call it. I, I don’t, I keep, I keep thinking breakup, but it’s not like we had, but that sounds like romantic breakup.

INTERVIEWER: Like is it…

ZOE: But, I mean I guess I could call it the breakup letter. (Interview #32)

In this excerpt, Zoe described being unable to face her mother. Instead she wrote a letter to convey she was unhappy in their relationship and that she did not want to have a relationship anymore. When asked about how she thinks of this chapter, Zoe drew a parallel to a romantic break-up but also argues that it was different although she does not explain how. In the end, she signaled that the letter was pivotal to the estrangement by finally labeling the chapter as “the breakup letter.” In this example we see evidence that dissolution between romantic partners might be qualitatively different from dissolution between parents and their children.

Participants also wrote letters to provide extensive attributions for the estrangement before telling their parent or parents that they no longer wanted a relationship. Writing a letter afforded adult children with the ability to communicate all of their reasons without being interrupted. For example, another participant recounts:
CASSIDY: Um, so I put together this like eight-page letter to write to my mom and basically like told her everything. I had never really said to her, you know, these are the things you’ve done that I haven’t been okay with or that I don’t think are right, you know. I’m not; I’m a bright person. I know what’s normal and what’s not normal. Not saying that everyone needs to be normal but there has to be some sense of normalcy. And, you know, I think a lot of the things I wrote down probably hurt her. I told her that she had been inappropriate with me and she brought inappropriate people in my life and really messed with my head that way. And I told her that she, you know, she basically demonizes me and then idolizes me and there is no rhyme or reason as to what, you know, there’s a lot of, there’s a lot of lines that would just get crossed with her and she had no respect for what I wanted or what I thought. And um, I told her that basically like “Don’t contact me”, you know. But, right now it’s, it was September of my senior year of high school. I was, you know, getting ready to go to college. Had a lot on my plate. I knew that I wanted to like do well and stay on track and I just couldn’t fathom the idea of going off to college, being by myself and having to deal with her. (Interview #35)

Cassidy used a letter to address past problems and communicate how her mother’s inconsistent behavior was stressful and problematic. She noted that her relationship with her mother is not normal, suggesting that the culture has a script for a parent-child relationship and that their mother-daughter relationship did not fit that script. In doing so, Cassidy alluded to what Hays (1996) describes the ideology of intensive mothering. Specifically, Hays contends that a “good mother” feels intense unconditional love for her children and respects them as they mature. Intensive mothering requires complete focus on the child and self-sacrifice by the mother (Hays, 1996). As we can see in this example, Cassidy clearly communicated that she does not feel like her mother respects her (“had no respect for what I wanted or what I thought”). In addition, by talking about the inappropriate people Cassidy’s mom brought into her life, she also flagged that her mother did not self-sacrifice and ultimately could have put her child in danger. Cassidy’s letter, then, suggested that her mother was “bad” because she could not meet the standards of a good mother. As a result, Cassidy asked her mother to stop contacting her so that she could focus on getting ready to go to college.

Although less prevalent, some participants also chose to tell their parent or parents face-to-face that the relationship was over. One participants described an interaction with her mother:
OLIVE: I told her that I could no longer be in a situation that she was putting me in because she was still doing drugs. And I lived with her and there were drugs coming in and out of the house constantly. So, I told her that I just couldn't take it anymore and that's when I left. Um, yeah. (Interview #20)

In this excerpt, Olive told her mother that she could no longer be in a situation where she was constantly surrounded by drugs. Important to the concept of Fait Accompli, Olive did not give her mother a chance to respond and directly told her mother why she could not take it anymore. In fact, participants (like Cassidy and Olive) who gave voice to this practice were often able to voice direct attributions for why they were dissolving the relationship with their parent or parents.

Taken together, telling the parent the relationship was over was a direct way for adult children to move along the estrangement continuum towards greater distance. Often one of the first actions some participants took, it might be important to note that many adult children chose to deliver this news in writing as opposed to face-to-face. Participants explained that e-mail and physical letter writing allowed them to get their thoughts out uninterrupted, control their parent or parents’ ability to respond, and be able to deliver a potentially difficult message without having to talk about or express emotion. Although typically considered impolite or inappropriate to dissolve a romantic relationship in writing in American culture (Starks, 2007), dissolution by way of e-mail/letters might be a more appropriate way of communicating a desire for distance in familial relationships.

“I Delivered An Ultimatum”

Another declarative category emerged when adult children provided their parent or parents with an ultimatum and subsequently followed through with the stated consequences. Specifically, the category, “I delivered an ultimatum,” represents two practices adult children used to accomplish distance between themselves and their parent or parents. First, ultimatums were delivered to warn their parent of the consequences for a specific (future) behavior. One participant explains:
DEVINA I told her what I’ll do if she does certain things. I told her I won’t talk to her anymore. “You will have nothing to do with my life” … Um, I remember I told her that if she had to leave my father I would respect it if she would do it maturely, get a divorce. Settle herself. Get her an apartment and if she just abandons us, I told her “You will never hear from me again. I will distance myself from you completely. We will have no contact whatsoever and I will make sure you will never get any of my information or if I start a family, you will never know.”

INTERVIEWER: What was her reaction?

DEVINA She just cried when I did it that time. Um, when she actually abandoned the family I told her, “Do you remember what I said?” And she was just like, “Yeah whatever like you would do it.” And I told her this is the last time we will talk and that’s what happened. (Interview #37)

In this interaction, we see Devina lay out the parameters (“if she does certain things”) of what would happen if her mother abandoned her family. She explained that she would completely distance herself and cease any and all communication in both the present and the future. Thus, the ultimatum not only applies to Devina but also applies to any future grandchildren. When discussing her mother’s reaction, Devina recalled reminding her mother of the ultimatum and then illustrates her willingness to follow through with the ramifications when she completely stops speaking with her mother (see continuous maintenance practices). Although Devina’s communicative practice of delivering an ultimatum did not yield her desired result, other participants had more success. Hannah reveals:

So, I threatened her and told her if you ever, if you call me in the middle of the night, if you keep doing this I am just, I am going to just never answer my phone and you’re never going to talk to me again.

INTERVIEWER: So, in many ways she was very responsive to your threats and ultimatums?

HANNAH: Yeah. Yeah. She, uh, I think she was, she was reasonable enough to know and she knew me well enough to know that when, when I would hit my breaking point. Because I didn’t, I didn’t really, I don’t think I ever gave her empty threats. I think, I would, I would get to the point where I would, I would really be insistent that she stop doing something when it was either involving someone else in my sort of outside life that didn’t involve her or when it was interfering with something that I needed to do. (Interview #42)
Hannah was able to create communicative distance by delivering an ultimatum to her mother. As argued in Chapter 1, parent-child estrangement is not binary, but rather individuals can locate themselves on a continuum of estrangement. By creating boundaries through delivering the ultimatum and by following through on her “threats,” Hannah was able to establish distance without completely severing the relationship she has with her mother. Thus, delivering an ultimatum functions in two ways that move participants along the estrangement continuum. First, the communicative act of delivering an ultimatum accomplishes distance by creating conditions on which the relationship depends. This is important because typically family relationships are considered unconditionally binding. Thus, the act of delivering an ultimatum violates that assumption, ultimately creating a condition where we see the power of communication in deconstructing what it means to be a family. Second, adult children might move along the estrangement continuum if the parent fails to meet the conditions that the participant sets, making an ultimatum a particularly effective way for children to accomplish distance with their parents.

The second ultimatum practice used to achieve distance emerged when adult children delivered an ultimatum with immediate repercussions. In other words, the first ultimatum practice served as a future warning for a particular behavior, whereas the second practice was an immediate warning with immediate consequences. Specifically, this second type of ultimatum was typically the communicative event that helped the adult child accomplish the desired amount of distance after other attempts at avoidance had failed. For example I asked a participant:

INTERVIEWER: Did you, what if anything did you say to your mom when you left?

CONNIE: I had tried everything else …I said, “You can choose to drink or you can choose me.” And I already had my bags packed because I knew I was leaving. I said, "If you pick up that drink, I'm leaving". So she picked up the drink and I went upstairs and got my suitcase and walked out the door.

INTERVIEWER: So you gave her an ultimatum?
CONNIE: Yep.

INTERVIEWER: And how did she respond?

CONNIE: She just picked up the drink, looked at me, and drank it. And I was like, "Okay." (Interview #4)

In this example, Connie attempted to give her mother one last chance before she leaves, even though she already has her bags. By pointing out she already was packed, Connie suggested that she knew her ultimatum would not facilitate the desired outcome but still retained some hope. In this second ultimatum practice, participants described feeling like they needed to know that they had exhausted all other options before estranging themselves from their parent. In offering an ultimatum, participants were able to relinquish some feelings of guilt. In fact one participant explains:

DAVE: Just, I would say, try everything you can and once you feel like you have given it everything you have, and you feel just completely disconnected, mind, body, and soul, cut the ties. Life is too short. Don't worry about stuff that you can't control. At some point you have to say, something's got to change. (Interview #18)

This excerpt suggests that, for this participant, trying everything he could before cutting ties was an important part of the distancing process. Delivering an ultimatum, then, often represented one last try before the participants hit their breaking point.

In sum, both ultimatum practices served to accomplish distance between the child and the parent. The first practice emphasizes future interactions, the power in communicating the ultimatum, and how the ultimatum serves as a figurative boundary, that when crossed, justifies other communicative practices that move the adult children along the estrangement continuum. The second practice emphasizes current interactions and might also serve as a way for adult children to justify breaking up with a family member in the moment. Regardless of its many functions, delivering an ultimatum is a way adult children effectively declared their desire for distance.

“I Sought Third Party Intervention”
The category, “I sought third party intervention”, includes the communicative practices of “I accepted my family’s intervention” and “I received government intervention.” Specifically, adult children constructed scenarios where they, for whatever reason, were unable to achieve distance by themselves. In these instances, a third party intervened on their behalf in order to help facilitate the distance. Of note, third party intervention functioned like the other declarative practices to quickly establish and maximize distance, often marking the first successful attempt by the participant to accomplish distance. Third party intervention, however, was not possible unless the participants talked about their experience with someone who was willing and able to act. Consequently, third party intervention was not possible for all participants.

“Told Accepted My Family’s Intervention”

This practice depicts instances where third parties, specifically members of the participants’ families, helped intervene for the adult child in a variety of ways in order to help that child accomplish distance from their parent or parents. Participants described situations where their immediate, extended, and foster families attempted and often succeeded in helping them accomplish the distance they desperately desired. In particular, accepting intervention was only an option because participants shared their desire for distance. In other words, this practice was not a way to present distance that was already accomplished (see chapter 4 and RQ2a) but rather distance was achieved because a third party intervened on the participants’ behalves. For example, Kayla recounts a time when her mother served as the “middle woman” between her and her father. She tells:

I just told him like, before, like the last conversation that I ever had with him was, you know, “Like I can’t,” he wanted to come visit me with one of his buddies who was involved with drugs and stuff. And I just told him, “I’ll talk to you later.” Click. And then I told my mom about it and she’s like, “Well you know, if it’s upsetting you this much then don’t answer his calls anymore” and I said “Yeah you’re right” and I ended up turning off my phone. He would call my mom’s cell phone because that is how they would communicate and uh, she just said I was busy all the time and then it came to a point where I just threw the
First, Kayla discussed how her mom provided her with the suggestion to simply not answer her father’s calls anymore. In doing so, Kayla’s mom provided her with informational support, or more specifically, appraisal support. According to Goldsmith (2004), appraisal support is characterized as a subset of informational support and occurs when someone provides a new perspective or assists in a reappraisal of a given situation. In this example, Kayla was able to reappraise her options based on her mother’s suggestion and responds by saying, “Yeah, you’re right” and enacting the communicative practice of turning off her phone. In addition, the example also showed that Kayla’s mother is providing emotional support, which Goldsmith argues is characterized by “expressions of caring, concern, empathy or reassurance of worth” (p. 13). This is evident in Kayla’s retelling of her mom’s concern (i.e., “if it’s upsetting you this much”). Second, because Kayla did not want to speak with her father, her mother then ran interference, serving as the “middle woman” between Kayla and her dad. In order to do so, her mother made excuses, and, after repeated attempts by her dad to make contact, Kayla simply threw her phone away. Finally, Kayla’s mom bought her a new phone with a different number in order to help Kayla cease phone communication. By buying her a new phone, Kayla’s mother also provided tangible support (i.e., the offering of goods and services) in addition to appraisal and emotional support. Another example of tangible support is exemplified by the following participant’s account:

OLIVE: They [former foster parents] asked me to come. Um, they wanted me to be a nanny for them for the summer while I was out of school. So they asked me to move down with them to get out of the situation that I was in. (Interview #20)

In this scenario, Olive’s former foster parents provided her with an invitation to physically leave her mother to come and live with them. As the example suggests, Olive’s former foster parents recognized the unhealthy situation she was in (“to get out of the situation I was in”) and provided her a means of escape. Thus, with third party assistance in the form of tangible support, Olive was able to create distance between her
and her mother by returning to live with her former foster family. In concert with this example, some of the participant’s family members went to even further extremes to help them accomplish distance with their parents. Fred explains:

So things were very unstable and uh uh, there was some abuse and my mom was not even there. You know she was totally like a zombie uh as far, to me and my sister. My family was not, the rest of my family was not unaware as to what was going on. And, uh, um, my sister and I with the help of my uncle and grandparents uh ran away. And um, um, and we snuck out one morning with our backpacks full of some clothes and a few personal items instead of our school books and instead of getting on the bus we walked around the school where there was a car waiting for us … Mom's parents. That's right. So my mom's parents orchestrated this. And um, so they uh uh, they actually uh, they spirited us away, they hid us in a non-disclosed location and uh, and they tracked her down and they confronted her and said, “We've got your kids, they are not coming back, you can come with us or you can stay here”. And uh, she decided to stay there. So off we go … I was, we were, I was really considering running off even if the rescue hadn't occurred. (Interview #21)

Similar to many participants’ accounts, Fred and his sister were living in an abusive home. However, unlike those participants whose extended family either did not know or did not care, Fred’s maternal grandparents and uncle formulated a plan to remove the children from that unhealthy environment. As Fred explained, the intervention was not forced upon him because he was considering running away regardless of what he describes as the rescue. After the rescue Fred continues:

So to that end, um, it was a relief to have, I mean I was going to get to live in uh uh a home, a real home, with uh electricity and um, and we didn't have to hide the fact that we were there because we were there illegally, uh uh, I knew where my meals were coming from, it was amazing, I couldn't believe the luxury. And they were poor. And it was not like we were living in uh uh luxury. They were laborers. Uh, but um, uh but they weren't career criminals which is a fundamental difference. Uh, so um, that was awesome. It was just, I was so proud to just get away, to be able to have the ability to get away. And then elated to have a bedroom with a real bed in it. (Interview #21)

This example particularly illustrates the participant’s desire to get away but inability to do so until a family member interfered. Thus, Fred’s family helped him accomplish distance by providing him resources that he was unable to attain by himself. As a result, Fred was able to have a stable home with bed and security in knowing from where his meals were coming. As Fred described, he was proud to be able to get away.
Taken together, “I accepted family intervention” is a practice that illustrates how members of the participant’s extended family were sometimes able to facilitate the parent-child distancing. Unlike parent alienation where a family member turns the child against the other parent, these participants clearly express their independent desire for distance, or at least were in a situation where they had a choice to either take or leave the assistance being offered (e.g., Olive could have turned down the invitation).

Furthermore, this third party facilitation was only made possible because the participants felt like they were able to disclose their situation to another member(s) of their extended family. Consequently, we can see how disclosure might have real implications for the estrangement process.

“I Received Government Intervention”

The second communicative practice, “I received government intervention”, illustrates the ways distance was accomplished with the help of the Department of Human Services (DHS) or Division of Child Support (DCS). In this practice, participants reported another community member or educator notifying a governmental agency on their behalves after they confessed what was going on in their home. Specifically, this practice only applies to children who, at the time, were not considered to be a legal adult. Similar to the family intervention practice, government intervention highlights participants’ inability to accomplish distance on their own, despite their desire. Sophie’s narration reveals that DHS or DCS helped facilitate the distance she desperately sought to accomplish between her and her father. She recalls:

SOPHIE: I think she was an adolescent or infant surgical neurologist and whatever, she was the shit, she knew her shit and she didn't take any shit and um, I think she was responsible for him being reported to DHS or DCS. And from that point on, a lot of things started to happen. I was visited at school by DCS, by DHS, and not just by independent counselors and I was not told that if I had said anything they would have to contact him and the fact that I wasn't told that made me feel more comfortable to talk and I just began talking, talking to the counselors that would come in and they would pull me out of class … and I remember the lawyer talking to us over at mom's about what to expect and she said, she basically said “I want you to be prepared for us to take you out because we're going to take you out. And so I need you to keep your clothes packed, I
need you to keep your things where you can get to them” and I remember in February of the next year… there was a knock on the door at night and I was upstairs at the time and he opened the door and there was this women, this very tall, strong-looking woman, and mom said she was great that she just didn't give a fuck, you couldn't mess with her and um, my dad brought us downstairs and sat us on the couch and I don't remember what the exchange was but I remember her talking to him and saying she was from the department of whatever and whatever … but the idea was that regardless of what they saw they were going to remove us but she had to go through certain steps to appear like she was investigating the house … and she basically said alright, get your things, and my mom was there in the driveway … And I don't remember if there was any exchange but my father was completely taken aback and I don't remember looking at him and I don't remember seeing that he was angry but knowing he was out of his element … And um, he had to behave because this was someone of the court and I remember packing up all of our schoolbooks and bagging up all of our clothes in bags like we normally did and left … Um, and then we had another court hearing maybe a week later, it wasn't through the regular courts it was through DHS and they basically awarded mom custody and ironed out child support and things like that and he ended up not paying child support for over a year and they slapped him for that so he eventually had to pay up. And they also instituted visitation which at that point I figured was optional because there was no way I was ever going to go over there again. And I never did. (Interview #25)

This excerpt began by Sophie talking about her friend’s mother, the surgical neurologist, who Sophie perceives was the person to contact DHS or DCS. Specifically, Sophie called attention to the fact that she was “the shit” and “knew her shit” and “she didn’t take any shit”, perhaps drawing a comparison to herself - someone who did not have the power to accomplish the distance by herself. Thus, facilitated by a third party, this detailed account highlights that DHS or DCS was the mechanism by which Sophie was able to finally leave her father’s house. As described, DHS or DCS provided a safe place for Sophie to share her story as evidenced by her description of not being told that her father would be notified if she shared her account. Thus, DHS and DCS first provided a place where this participant felt efficacious enough to share her story. Next, government intervention worked to physically remove this participant from an unhealthy environment. Sophie described packing up her belongings and meeting her mom who was waiting in the driveway. Third, DHS or DCS helped facilitate a legal custody change. Gaining custody was an important step for both Sophie and her mother who was unable to get custody until that point. Sophie previously explained, “I guess the easiest way to explain it was, my parents got divorced when I was two, and uh, there was a 15
year long custody battle” (Interview #25). This example shows that Sophie and her mother were continuously trying to accomplish distance but were unable to do so by themselves. In sum, government intervention enabled participants to accomplish distance in ways that they could not do for themselves because of their age and/or situation. As indicated by Sophie, once she was able to leave she never wanted to return and she never did.

Overall, the category of third party intervention highlights two different ways children were able to gain distance from their parents when they had help. In particular, these communicative practices reinforce the need for government agencies such as DCS, DHS, and the foster care system. This category also illuminates the importance of disclosure, as participants were only able to receive help when they communicated their situation to others. Although assisted by others, participants used third party intervention to enact the declarative distance practice they were unable to perform by themselves.

“I Stood Up (For Myself) to My Parents”

Although perhaps less drastic than “I told them it was over,” “I stood up (for myself) to my parents” is a communicative practice that nonetheless creates distance. Participants described instances when they were finally able to stand up to their parents and took direct action to create distance. Without going as far as to tell their parents the relationship was over (i.e., Fait Accompli), participants who gave voice to this practice made it clear to their parents something had changed in their relationship. For example, one participant Mandy narrates:

I think it was the first time the girls had seen my mom sort of have one of these sort of blowups and um, my youngest daughter was crying and very upset and frightened and um, I, I got very upset and, and pretty much you know, I had never really um, confronted my mother during one of these sort of episodes previously as far as you know, when it was my child instead of me it was sort of I’ll never see the end of it. I felt like I needed to protect my, protect my daughter and, um, I got between them and I asked the girls to go upstairs and, and I just calmly told my parents, I told my mother that was absolutely inappropriate. I was very angry. I was so angry I couldn’t speak but I didn’t raise my voice and to leave my house and um, I just said you need to pack up your things and you know, if you want to head home that’s fine or get a hotel room but you’re not welcome here. You
know, I don’t want to ever see you abusing my child in that way. And um, my mother was absolutely shocked, you know, and then she was all upset about, of course I wasn’t abusing her, you know. She just needed to know it affected me. She needed to know how much it, you know, hurts other people when she does stupid things and, and I just said now is not the time for us to discuss this. You just need to leave and so um… (Interview #16)

Mandy explains that an altercation between her mother and her daughter served as the catalyst for Mandy to finally protect herself and her daughter from her mother’s blowups. Mandy provided an account of how she calmly told her mother that she was inappropriate and then asked both of her parents to leave the house; they were not welcome in Mandy’s home any longer. In this action, Mandy was able to accomplish distance with her mother by directly telling her that her actions are hurtful and asking both her parents to leave.

In addition to verbally defending themselves, some participants stood up for themselves by physically fighting back. For example, one participant recounts:

FAITH: Um, well, um, I'd say Chapter 1, the first thing I started doing when I was young, when I was probably a teenager was that I started fighting back. You know, I was, that distance, well I think you need to reach a point where you tell yourself that this is wrong. And so you start either physically fighting back or getting angry and telling her that you disagree with her. That started the distance, there was always a chasm between us but I would say that I was starting to understand who I was as a person and knowing her treatment of me was incorrect. (Interview #8)

Faith explained that by the time she became a teenager she reached a point where she decided that she was not being treated the way she wanted to be treated. In light of this conclusion, Faith gained the efficacy to fight back against her physically and verbally abusive mother. In this example, she described gaining a sense of self (“understand who I was as a person”) and recognized that she could do something about her situation.

Unlike parent-child conflict-resolution cycles that occur as a natural part of many relationships, these participants stood up to their parent and then expressed how they did not want to ever reconcile. For example, when asked about whether they ever saw themselves reconciling Mandy and Faith, who provided the examples above, responded with, “No, I don’t. I’ve already reached the breaking point and I’m not going to go there again” and “No. And I think that anyone who knew her would say never” (Interviews
Thus, standing up to parent both verbally and physically, despite not using the words, “it’s over”, nonetheless marked a significant change in the relationship and appears to be very different from an everyday parent-child conflict.

Overall, initial declaration practices moved participants along the estrangement continuum, helping the adult children establish desired distance. Sometimes, these practices closely resembled the actions individuals might take to dissolve a romantic or friend relationship (e.g., Fait Accompli); other times, more seemingly drastic measures were required (e.g., government intervention). Adult children, however, never ended their estrangement story with a declarative practice. Of the participants who employed a declarative practice, all of them also described at least one continuous practice and sometimes both one-time and continuous practices. Some participants engaged in a follow-up practices once (hence the label one-time practices) but all of the participants reported that they continuously had to enact certain communicative practices to ensure they maintained their desired level of distance. Next, I turn to a discussion of these communicative practices.

**One-Time Practices**

As argued, estrangement is a process where adult children might find themselves all along an estrangement continuum in constant flux. Thus, even though some of the initial declarative practices moved the participants along the continuum very quickly, other factors such as family member intervention or anticipated negative reactions drove participants back along the continuum. In fact, participants often talked about the struggle they faced being estranged from their parent. For example, Iliana explains that the most supportive thing people can do is not judge her. She recounts:

ILIANA: Just, believing me. Um, accepting what I said at face value. Not trying to convince me that I was wrong. Um, so if I say, I don't have that relationship, they just say okay. And that's um, because I think the hardest part is the hardest part is that there are so many messages and assumptions in our culture that this is not how things should be.
INTERVIEWER: In our culture ...

ILIANA: Mother's Day cards. I can say um, oh my mother gave that to me. And everyone says aww. So, and because I have a general expectation that people are rational human beings so it's really hard to believe that maybe someone isn't and maybe that this is an okay thing to do and maybe it isn't because I am not trying hard enough. Um, that you know, all mothers and daughters love each other if they just would admit it. You know, it's a natural part of being human. So there's a lot of pressure even if no one says it. There's that message in the world that to be a mother is to love. And I'm not even saying that she doesn't but there's that message that there is forgiveness for all things and that all relationships can be healed. And all mothers should be with their daughters. So it's hard to believe that that's not necessarily true. It takes a lot of faith in myself.

Iliana reveals that there is a cultural expectation (“even if no one says it”) that mothers and daughters should be together. This pressure often compelled participants to do things to remind themselves of why they sought distance and engage in new strategies to make sure that they did not default back into a more “culturally accepted” relationship. Thus, one-time practices are those that helped participants, both those who employed declarative practices and those who did not, maintain the desired level of distance, remind themselves of why they needed to distance themselves in the first place, and/or helped them increase the distance.

Specifically, one-time (maintenance) practices are those that, because of the nature of the action, participants only had to enact once. Similar to the declarative practices, one-time practices also were enacted in conjunction with at least one of the continuous practice. Of note, one-time practices, although serving to accomplish and maintain distance simultaneously, typically were used as a way to maintain distance with their parent or parents. The following five communicative practices exemplify this one-time supra theme: (1) “I moved away ”, (2) “I made it difficult for them to find/contact me”, (3) “I took legal action”, (4) “I stood up for others/became an activist”, and (5) “I got a tattoo.”

“I Moved Away”

Four communicative practices coalesce to form the category, “I moved away”: (1) “I moved in with another family member”, (2) “I attended college far away”, (3) “I
moved out of the house”, and (4) “I got married/romantically involved”. Although these four communicative practices involve some physical removal, each practice illustrates a different way the adult child was able to move away. Assuming the adult children never moved back, this practice was something the adult child only had to do once in order to accomplish and maintain physical distance. Taken together, these four communicative practices often marked the ways that moving away might look different across the lifespan given that some of these practices occurred when the participants were children and others happened later on in life. Nonetheless, physically moving away was a particularly salient communicative practice that afforded these participants the opportunity to accomplish distance.

“I Moved in With Another Family Member”

Sometimes participants reported that they moved in with another family member in order to distance themselves from their parents. Often occurring before they were 18, these participants had network resources capable of providing them with a viable alternative to living with the parent from whom they sought distance. For some participants, this meant going to live with another parent - one who was ostensibly divorced from the parent with whom the child was currently living. Cassidy recounts:

> My mom would completely fall apart and would tell me she was going to end her life if I left her and that she couldn’t live without me, couldn’t breathe without me, all those things, which was really difficult for me to deal with and in my perception, as like a twelve or thirteen year old, my dad’s house seemed more stable to me because he had gotten married and settled down. There was another kid there who was, you know, essentially my age. I just felt, you know, my stepmom was the kind of person who made dinner, which my mom had never done in my entire life. She cleaned the house. She did laundry. Like, things that I thought normal, normal people did and so I like kind of craved that and so I wanted to move to my dad’s. And so, finally after eighth grade, right before high school, I told my mom that I was leaving and I did. I moved to my dad’s which was like twelve hours away. (Interview #35)

Cassidy explained that the content of her mom’s communication was distressing and that the lure of a “normal” family with a mom that cooks, cleans, and does laundry persuaded
her to leave. In the end, Cassidy made the decision to move in with her dad and stepmom, which helped create physical distance with her biological mother and established some stability. In this scenario, it is likely that nonresidential parents served as a safe haven for participants who might have otherwise felt compelled to stay in an unhealthy relationship. Other participants talked about how their grandparents’ home served as an alternative to living with their parents. Jon reveals:

Um, so when I was thirteen I witnessed my mom doing heroine and uh, that summer I said I wanted to go stay with my grandparents for a visit and I never went back. And that, that started the separation between my mother and I … Um, I didn’t say a whole lot because I was afraid of the abuse that would ensue afterwards. It was a lot of avoidance, um, you know, when she would be coming home from work I would make sure I was up in my room and just avoided her at all costs. Um, this complicated this because my grandparents lived next door, her mom and dad. Um, she has an estranged relationship with them as well. She went twelve years without talking to them and now has gone an additional in the last eight years and has not spoken to them. They don’t condone her, uh, behavior and therefore don’t want her in their life and I’m her only child so she has literally no contact with any family. That’s all she has. (Interview #38)

Jon began this account by providing an attribution for wanting to go live with his grandparents. Furthermore, he explains why he took a passive approach (e.g., “didn’t say a whole lot” or “I was afraid of the abuse”) to seeking distance. Similar to many participants, Jon suggested that estrangement was a family tradition (“she has an estranged relationship with them as well”) and provides further justification for desiring to move to his grandparents’ home.

“I Attended College Far Away”

For many participants physical distance was accomplished when they were old enough to attend college. Unlike many college-bound individuals, these participants did not describe wanting to attend the “best” school, the “most affordable school”, or the school where they felt most comfortable. Instead, participants clearly described selecting a college because of its physical distance, from their parents. One adult child conveys:

KAYLA: Um, I think going to uh, to a college in [state] helped distance too. Like, I had the option of going to um, [school] in [city] and I had a full scholarship … like I told her I wanted to go to [school] so bad and that’s where my mom went to college too like I wanted to do that ever since I was younger and
the fact that I couldn’t go, it upset me but mostly because it was just because of my dad, mostly.  (Interview #14)

Kayla first acknowledged how going to a college in a different state helped her accomplish distance with her dad. This decision was particularly hard for her because had to give up a full scholarship and the opportunity to attend the college she had wanted to attend since she was a young girl. This example clearly shows that physically distancing herself was such a priority that she was willing to give up both a free education and a life-long dream. Making sacrifices was not atypical for participants who wanted to create distance with their parent or parents. Another adult child relates:

ANDY: I looked for colleges further away from home … Yeah, I was going to school in-state in [state] and I went to school and was too close to home and I just got tired of being around and I came out here and visited some friends and I liked it. And I was like I'm going to go to school out here. And to do that I applied, took school to get my GPA up and when I got accepted, I knew I didn't have any money to do it, so I joined the military and then left for about 6 months for training, came back and then moved out here. (Interview #3)

For Andy, moving away from his parents meant working hard to get a high enough GPA to transfer to another school. Furthermore, because of financial reasons, he decided to join the military. Attending a college further away, then, was so important to this participant that he joined an organization that, at some point, might ask him to give his life. These two examples suggest that attending college far away was extremely important and required hard work and many sacrifices.

“I Moved Out of the House”

Sometimes, attending college was not an option for participants but moving away was still an important step they wanted or felt they needed to take. In fact, some participants felt that physically removing themselves from their house was a life and death decision. For example, Nolan illustrates:

NOLAN: Um, first major act. I don't know that's tough because when I was a kid, I would always try and not come home, sneak off to friends' places. Um, yeah, I think the first major major thing was when I was fifteen and moved out for a couple years. Took my little suit case and moved from couch to couch and whoever would take me I would stay with them for a little while. But that was after an isolated incident. My dad tried to kill me. I'm just going to leave it at that. So after that I was out of the house for a little while. (Interview #49)
Nolan reported that after his dad tried to kill him at age 15, he packed his bags and moved from couch to couch for years before he returned to his father’s home. Although it perhaps sounds extreme, participants often provided very compelling attributions for seeking physical distance from their parent or parents. Unlike Nolan, some adult children moved out and never returned. Another participant narrates:

CALEB: Well, I moved out of the apartment. I went and found a new place to live in about a three days span of time. I never told her that I was leaving.

INTERVIEWER: Can we call this a new chapter?

CALEB: Um, sure. Call it, uh, call it The Great Schism. I like that. Well, I moved out and um, she never called me. I never called her. My father never called me. (Interview #13)

In this example, Caleb moved out of the apartment he was sharing with his mother and never told her he was leaving. Specifically, stealing away without a conversation reveals how moving away was often a passive communicative practice that adult children employed to create distance without having to discuss the reason with their parent or parents. Caleb continued to explain that his mother never called, his father never called, and he never called to reestablish communication or a relationship. Thus, for him, moving out of the house was a particularly effective way to move along the estrangement continuum.

“I Got Married/Romantically Involved”

Finally, “I got married/romantically involved” depicts participants who entered into “romantic” relationships in order to accomplish distance. Participants typically engaged in this communicative practice when they were very young. As Gwen explains, “I got married to just move away, I was too scared to move away on my own” (Interview #41). Comparatively, entering a new relationship for Gwen was more desirable than staying with her parents. She specifically did not talk about loving her husband or wanting to start a new family. Instead, she focused in on the escape from her immediate family. I spoke with another participant who describes:
INTERVIEWER: So you were 15 ... where did you go?

CONNIE: I moved in with a guy from high school. He had his own place.

INTERVIEWER: Was this a friend, or a boyfriend?

CONNIE: He was just a guy with a car, and money, who could buy me the things I wanted. Um, he had his own place, his own vehicle, so it was an easy trade. And uh, um ... I would call him a boyfriend, but it wasn't. We just have to do what we have to do to get what we need. Um, ... I, I, lowered my standards just to get out of there and I never went back (Interview #4)

In this example, Connie suggested that she might have done things she would not have normally done (e.g., “lowered my standards”). But she described these things as “an easy trade” and “what we have to do to get what we need”. In this scenario, Connie’s need to get away from her mother was so great that she was willing to enter into a new relationship with someone she could not bring herself to classify as a boyfriend. Like Gwen, entering into a new relationship was not about the joy or excitement of starting a new family or partnership, but rather, was about the participant getting out of the house.

In sum, physically moving away was one of the most prominent ways adult children both accomplished and maintained distance with their parent or parents. Often enacted in conjunction with other one-time and continuous practices (see next practice “I made it difficult for them to find/contact me” and continuous practice “I stayed away”), this category illustrates that physical distance might not be as effective in the estrangement process as literature suggests (see Agllias 2011a).

“I Made it Difficult for Them to Find/Contact Me”

Another way adult children were able to maintain distance was by eliminating a way for their parent or parents to contact them. For example, Janey revealed, “Um, she no longer has my cell phone number. I had changed cell phone numbers. Um, and I have moved and she does not know that address” (Interview #12). Thus, we can see that Janey changed her phone number and address and, because she did not give them to her mother, her mother had no way of contacting Janey. Another participant, Jon, explains:

I ignored her emails. Um, so here, here’s, now that I’m, so when I started, when I distanced myself this most recent time, five years ago in [state], we moved. I
didn’t tell her where we moved to. I took a new job. I never told her where I took a new job with. When we moved from [state] to [state], two years ago, she has no idea. She has, she would have no clue to where we are living. Um, she doesn’t have my phone number. She has, other than my email address that I’ve had since I was twelve years old, that is the only way she would know how to find me is through that, that email address and like I said she has emailed me but I have not responded to those emails. (Interview #38)

Jon related that after he moved he did not tell his mother where he lived, where he worked, and a number where he could be reached. By essentially disappearing and by not responding to her e-mail attempts, Jon was successfully able to maintain distance with his mother.

In efforts to make it more difficult for their parents to contact them, participants also discussed using social media. Participants used social media to maintain their privacy, communicate a desire for distance, and as a way to keep tabs on their parent. For example, an adult child explains:

JUNE: Mmm, not really, I won't list my phone number on Facebook just in case they somehow manage to infiltrate my privacy settings. I try not to list my, well I don't have a home phone but I try to make sure there is nothing online that they can contact me with, um, like I kind of make sure my information isn't out there, it shouldn't be anyway but specifically so she wouldn't get a hold of it. (Interview #46)

June contended that she was careful not to communicate any private information she would not want her mother having access to and that she has strict privacy settings. Thus, she monitored her social media and uses applications to maintain distance with her mother. Other participants used social media to communicate their ongoing desire for distance. Janey reveals, “Um, I have blocked her on Facebook” (Interview #12).

In addition to blocking the parent via social media, participants also communicated how they were able to use social media to control the information flow to intermediaries. Kayla elaborates:

Um, like I guess, okay so for a title, um, Moving On, I guess you can put that. So, to keep the distancing, um, social media was huge in terms of, you know, monitoring who was on there. Um, what family members on my Spanish side even to delete and block. You know, I had one aunt who, she was really, she wasn’t close with my dad but she was close with like the people who my dad hung around with and so she would always comment on my pictures and say, oh I miss you, but your dad misses you more. Things like that, I just, so yeah like I’m
not even going to respond to that and uh, um, and there was one time that I think my aunt on my Greek side sent me an email for like Christmas or whatever and she continually, every Christmas or Easter she would send an email and the only way she knew it was my email was there was one time I said, “Thanks. You too, “ like just cause I felt bad for not responding and then she’s like, oh and responded to that but I never responded back … But, yeah, the social media was huge. (Interview #14)

In order to maintain distance, Kayla not only blocked her father but felt like she had to delete and block other members of her family who were pressuring her to have a relationship with her father. Blocking individuals on Facebook limits them from accessing any of the person’s information. By doing so, Kayla ensured that her father and family could not communicate with her or learn any information about her. Social media, then, served as a way to simultaneously communicate a desire for distance and helped her maintain distance. Finally, and perhaps most complicated, adult children used social media to keep tabs on their parent or parents. Sophie explains:

SOPHIE: and I've completely blocked him on Facebook, although I have to admit that on two occasions I've unblocked him to see what's on his profile and under one of the photos he talks about being a single dad and raising three kids and two of them are in college right now or some bull and talking about my mom being a druggie and so I just block him. …

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel like you occasionally keep tabs on him to assure yourself he's not near you?

SOPHIE: Yeah. Yeah … Because this particular website said that my father was now living in [city] and that's what made me find him on Facebook, to see where he was living, to see if it were true … And I was able to find him and look at his profile and see that he was still in [city] and could see that he had done some recent posting since July and that made me feel really good. (Interview #25)

Like many of the other adult children who used social media to maintain distance, Sophie blocked her father on Facebook. Yet, given Sophie’s extreme concerns that her father would find her, she confessed that she would unblock him from time to time in order to keep tabs on him. By knowing where her father was, Sophie was able to gain some peace from the fact that her father was still physically distant from her. In this regard, social media was used to maintain distance through blocking and to ensure distance through keeping tabs. Perhaps interestingly, Sophie did not keep tabs on her father as a way to keep connected but rather because she wanted to ensure that they were not. This finding
is particularly interesting because social media sites, such as Facebook, are typically used to initiate and maintain relationships, as opposed to dissolve and ensure distance (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

“I Took Legal Action”

Participants who gave voice to this category used legal means to negate or neutralize their familial ties. Similar to married couples who get legally divorced, adult children wanted to make sure that official ties between themselves and their parents were broken. This is what Galvin (2006) terms “legitimizing”. Specifically, “legitimizing invokes the sanction of law or custom. It positions relationships as genuine and conforming to recognized standards” (p. 10). Although Galvin discusses legitimizing in reference to family construction in the absence of biological ties, this idea also transfers to the dissolution of families with biological ties. Put differently, adult children were able to accomplish and maintain distance by leveraging the law to firmly solidify their estrangement.

“I Legally Emancipated Myself”

In particular, participants engaged in two types of legal action practices. The first communicative practice, “I legally emancipated myself”, albeit not very prevalent in the data set, is a practice that depicts one of the most extreme ways an adult child accomplished distance with her parent. Instead of remaining with her parents or returning to state custody Allison describes:

I went down to the police station and they said we can put you back into the system or you can have yourself declared an emancipated minor so that's what I did, instead of going back to the foster care system, which is something I had already been in … So when I was 17, I had myself declared an emancipated minor, cutback on my school hours. I was already in an alternative high school because of the situation, but I ended up having to work eight, nine, ten hours a day in order to pay the rent at the weekly hotel that I was staying at. (Interview #1)

In this example, Allison was given the choice to return to the foster care system or have herself declared an emancipated minor. Given the choice, she declared herself an
emancipated minor and was able to create independence from her biological parents. One specific way she did this was by becoming financially independent so that she could support living by herself. Although this practice did not occur often within this data set, legal emancipation represents a particularly extreme initial declaration practice. Perhaps similar to divorce between married couples, emancipation reveals that relationships can be legally dissolved regardless of whether they are traditionally perceived as voluntary or nonvoluntary. Thus, even family relationships bound by blood cannot be taken for granted as legally enduring forever.

“I Changed My Legal Documents”

Second, some participants took less extreme measures but leveraged the law to help them maintain distance. Specifically, adult children who gave voice to the communicative practice “I changed my legal documents” were those who wanted to make sure that their parent could not inherit anything upon their death or who would not have the power to make medical decisions on their behalf. One participant explains:

SOPHIE: So I'm trying to think when we did this. My mom talked to us about whether or not we wanted to have living wills done. And I had always wanted to do something like that, I had even written it down. So when we started talking about if something happens and I'm a vegetable, we started talking about end of life things, so if I'm in an accident and the only way I'm going to be alive is through a feeding tube and a ventilator then I want you to let me go so we started talking very seriously about that and I think that was really helpful but one of the things I was very adamant about was that if I was going to draft mine, I wanted to make sure he was completely out of the picture and not just by not mentioning him but um, explicitly mentioning he was not to be involved in anyway and writing his name in ink, you know with a seal, by a notary making it a legal document that, so we did, we worked through my moms with a lawyer, I guess it was with whoever did living wills and powers of attorney and what not and so we sat down with him one day and I think out of all of my siblings I might be the only one who explicitly said no, and I think he tried, he didn't quite understand that if I didn't include him he wouldn't be included and if I included my mom's name, and my sister's name, and my brother's name that by not including my father, he would not be allowed to do anything even if he was my estranged father. But I said no. I know this man has weird political connections and Masonic connections and he has had the ability to fuck up a lot of things in my life and I want it explicitly written that under no circumstances and in no cases, is he is, has any say in my medical health, my financial stuff, if I die he gets nothing and I want it explicitly written. And we drafted both the durable power of attorney and some other power of attorney that goes along with it. And then in my living will I explicitly wrote him out. Um, but that probably above everything
else was in some ways comforting, just to know that there was a legal precedent for me to write him out and that I wasn't just changing my name and it wasn't just him moving. (Interview #20)

Sophie began by recounting a time when she first started to think about the legal rights her father might have because of their biological/familial relationship. In response, she made sure to write down that she disowned him and did not want him to have any say over any of her medical decisions. Because she was unsure whether her note was legally binding, she sought aid from an attorney. She explained in great detail that simply not listing her father in her living will/power of attorney was not an adequate assurance that her father would not inherit or have any medical control. Instead, she had the attorney specifically write her father out of the will and power of attorney. Only then was Sophie satisfied that the legal documents would fulfill her intentions. Another participant reveals:

CASSIDY: So, um, I do, I’m actually going through the process of like trying to get my next of kin changed and like, this is dumb and I don’t know if I think about this because I’m in medical school, but like my durable power of attorney would be my parents and I don’t want them to be that. I don’t want them to get my body if I suddenly die tomorrow like I don’t want them to have any control over any of that and so,

INTERVIEWER: You’re not the only person who has said that.

CASSIDY: Really? Okay good. Cause other people have been like, Cassidy only you would think of that. And I’m like, “No because I die, like, I guarantee you they would take my body, have a funeral, and they wouldn’t let anyone I loved there.” And it would, I mean, yeah I’m dead so what, but it matters. So if I’m sitting in a hospital bed in a vegetative state, like I don’t want them making decisions for me cause they, at the heart of it even, their views don’t align with me. I’m an organ donor. They don’t like organ donation like they just wouldn’t make the decisions I want. (Interview #35)

Cassidy explained that she did not want her biological parents to have any say over her body if she were to pass away. She noted that, given the relationship she has with her parents, no she loved would be allowed to attend her funeral. In addition, Cassidy did not trust her parents to make the decisions she wants with regard to her physical body. Thus, she described the importance of taking this legal action.
Furthermore, these examples shed light on a situation (i.e., family members having the right to make medical decisions) that non-estranged children might take for granted as a benefit. For example, Cassidy conveyed her relief that she is not the only person who has thought of amending her legal documents. She explained how her friends think she is an anomaly (“only you would think of that”). Estranged adult children, then, might carry the burden of not only decreasing interaction with their parent or parents but also thinking of potential implications of being in a family and taking the required legal steps to maintain distance.

In addition to taking legal action to protect themselves from parental intervention, some adult children used legal means to change their name and help construct a new identity for themselves. Thus, legal action was used to both legitimate the estrangement to the outside world and to create an internal sense of family identity without the estranged member. Legal action, then, helped participants to communicate their serious desire to maintain the distance they were able to accomplish between themselves and their parent or parents.

Specifically, changing their name was often a way for adult children to help construct an identity separate from the parent or parents from whom they are estranged. Those participants who talked about this communicative practice conveyed that they changed their name very deliberately, as opposed to it just being a normalized tradition such as when a woman might change her name when she gets married. For example, one adult child contends:

ELLIE: Um, I think there were some subtle things that he may not have known. Um, so as much as a feminist as I am, I chose to take my husband’s last name and I did that very purposefully because I did not want his name anymore. Um, and so while I never openly discussed that with him and I, I assume he would have not ever understood that piece of it, um, it was a very deliberate thing for me to distance that I was no longer this name anymore. Um, it was sort of liberating I guess. (Interview #39).

Ellie talked about purposely taking her husband’s name in spite of being a feminist. She explained that she did not want her father’s name and it was a very direct way that she
could maintain distance. By taking on her husband’s name, Ellie no longer had the reminder of her connection with her father. As opposed to Ellie, who chose to take her husband’s name at a time when the culture might expect someone to change their name, other participants chose to legally change their name outside of a culturally anticipated life transition. For example, Sophie explains:

> And uh, I started taking videos, and mom started taking videos of me playing soccer so that I could try and get a scholarship somewhere um, and then when I turned 18 maybe a week after that, mom knew I wanted to change my name and she gave me $114 dollars, took me to the courthouse, and I changed my name and I took her last name. And that was awesome. (Interview #25)

Although Sophie was using her mother’s maiden name unofficially at school, Sophie was able to legally change her name before she went to college. Supported by her mother, Sophie not only shed her father’s surname to maintain distance but also took on her mother’s last name in order to help build a new family identity. Sophie even describes her sister and her brother following suit:

> And I don't remember if it was my sophomore or my junior year but I got a call from my brother and I think it was my freshman year because my roommate was in the room and I got a call from my brother and he was like hey! This is Kevin, and I was like no, this is Jon and he said no this is Kevin and I think that went on for a couple of minutes and I finally realized that my brother had changed his name and my sister had changed her name together. (Interview #25)

Thus, Sophie’s whole family legally changed their name to solidify their new identity as a family separate from their father. As Galvin (2006) argues, “naming plays a significant role in the development of internal family identity as members struggle to indicate their familial status” (p. 12). By legally changing their names, Sophie and her mother, brother, and sister were able to engage in a communication practice designed to maintain an internal sense of family, one that excluded Sophie’s father.

Over all, the “I took legal action” category encompasses two practices that helped participants accomplish and maintain distance. Relying on the law in this capacity echoes other types of dissolution practices, such as divorce, that requires documentation
of the dissolution. Thus, it might come as no surprise that participants turned to the courts to achieve their estrangement goals.

“I Stood Up For Others/Became an Activist”

Participants maintained distance with their parents by standing up for other people who they perceived to be wronged by their parent or parents. In fact, the data suggest that adult children felt compelled to intervene when they saw their parent treating others in the same negative ways they were treated as children or the way they are treated as adults. For example, one adult child reports:

HARLEY: Well, just recently I said to her, I don't normally go home, but I did go home for her 80th birthday and I was there to assist with the running of the errands and not the planning cause my siblings did that and I actually witnessed her bully one of her friends, there was like pitting three women against one woman, and I saw that happening, and the next morning after the party I called her and said, “Did you realize that you did this? Do you realize how much that one person that you were picking on has helped you in your life?” and and um, “I don't think it's right and you did the same thing to me when I was going through a very stressful period and I don't even think you realize that you do it ... I think you better make amends with that person, the sooner the better. And I think you better do it in front of your other two friends”. So I called her on it. And I don't think she liked it but I did, and she said “I didn't do that” and I said “Yes you did”. And um, I said “You did the same thing to me years ago and it's not right and I think you need to fix it. It's never too late to change.” That's what I told her … [I felt] a little bit justified that my initial, feelings were correct that you think that your parents give you unconditional love when in fact it is conditional at times you know … But when I go, but I did tell her. This is why I don't come home. I had the conversation with her, this is why I don't come home, because there is no compassion. And by you, picking on this person, you need to realize that it looks like not a very compassionate person would do that. (Interview #10)

Harley witnessed her mother bullying another woman and felt compelled to call and talk to her mother about it. She directly compared the bullying of this woman to another time in her life when she was going through a stressful period. Harley was adamant that her mother should make amends and would not let her mother excuse herself, again comparing her mother’s action and reaction to another time in her life. Later in this example, Harley pointed out that this episode helped her justify her initial feelings and she in turn explains to her mother why she does not come home to visit. This standing up for her mother’s friend helped remind Harley why she originally accomplished distance
with her mother and thus helped her maintain her perceptions and might influence her future actions and interactions. Another participant narrates:

JANEY: Okay. Sarah [mother] had sent my sister Suzi an email and it was it was not a very nice email but she basically she wanted her and Suzi to start having contact again. But she had sent her a message on Facebook wanting her to have contact but still was like you made many mistakes, if you want your mom you need to do X, Y, and Z, and Suzi was upset and had shown me the e-mail so I had e-mailed Sarah back and said that this is Janey, do not email my sister. If you have nothing nice to say to her, then then why do you want contact with her if you continue to criticize her. She would love to have her mother in her life and actually have her mother in her life. But it's got to be a two-way street. Has Suzi made mistakes? Yes. But you have to realize that you made a lot of mistakes as well. And, I said, this is last time I'm going to talk to you, I just wanted to say, because Suzi came to me crying about you, that you have still have not changed and this is why we still don't have contact. And that was about a year ago.
(Interview #12)

Janey went out of her way to stand up for her sister when her mother tries to coerce her back into a relationship. Janey revealed that her mother’s behavior also acted a reminder as to why Janey no longer communicates with her mother. Thus, in standing up for her sister, Janey was able to tell her mother off and reestablish the reasons why she no longer has a mother-daughter relationship. In sum, it is possible that for many of these adult children standing up to their parent on someone else’s behalf was also a way for the participants to stand up for themselves.

In other instances, adult children stood up for groups of culturally marginalized individuals. Put differently, sometimes participants chose ideological grounds to take their stance. For example one participant recalls:

FRED: I fired off an email to him a while back. He wrote some email about um, you know, about the gays taking over our society and ruining everything. Uh, and he sent it to basically his entire, he does this, he sends these bigoted rants to like everyone he knows. Usually I ignore them. Uh but uh, this one was just the breaking point so I replied to all. With this, tirade about [sic] his bigotry and figured it was, it was probably not cool of my to do that, but I figured he's going to put his bigotry in everyone's e-mail box uh, then a check against that should go into everyone's email box as well.

INTERVIEWER: So when you say everybody?

FRED: I mean all of his in-laws, all of my aunts and uncles, um, a bunch of his friends, my sister, basically, his social circle. Everyone he communicates with. It seems like I do this in very public ways.
INTERVIEWER: So what did your email say?

FRED: Oh gosh. Um, uh, so there was something basically it was right after, actually this particular one wasn't that long ago it was right after the Supreme Court announced the Windsor case, it was before that, it had to be before that, for some reason he was conflating the increasing quantity of civil rights for same sex couples with the rise in violence in our nation. Uh, and um, I basically, I just used legal reasoning and just unpacked all of the conflation that he did between those things and why he is just flat out wrong in the things that he, what is it, so basically the idea was you can't let your religious beliefs determine the rights of other people. And if that's truly what you believe I don't even know how I can communicate on the same level as you. Basically, if these are the things you believe then you and I are so different that I don't even know how we can even have the same conversation with each other. And it kind of was building up to all of the anti-liberal stuff, all of the anti-atheist stuff, all of the anti-gay stuff, all of the racist stuff, if these are the things that you believe, then you and I have a belief system that is so divergent that I can't even talk to you.

INTERVIEWER: What was your goal with the email?

FRED: Interestingly, my goal was you know, I knew it wouldn't work but I did have the illusion that maybe he would be like oh, maybe I am kind of being a real asshole about this stuff. It was clear that that wasn't the outcome. I at least wanted to get some space from him. You know. If he's going to be like this then I don't want you to call me, I'm not going to be calling you. And that worked. Uh, his email blasts are still the same but it seems like he toned it down a little bit. At least as far as the uh, uh, the homosexuality stuff. There still is a lot of latent racism. But he will find something on Facebook, there is a picture of Obama laughing and say something like oh the fried chicken is here. He still does a whole bunch of racist stuff. He has toned down the homophobia because when I bit, it happened to be about that issue. So I don't know, maybe I just need to continue sending him tirades, issue specific tirades. I haven't spoken to him since then, at all. (Interview #21).

In response to what Fred calls a bigoted e-mail, Fred sent a response to his father’s social network outlining the fallacies of his father’s logic. Fred talked about their divergent beliefs systems, communicating a fundamental difference in beliefs and using that a foundation to create distance. Specifically, Fred explained that the goal of the email was to both show him the error of his ways and “get some space from him”.

Another way adult children attempted to maintain distance with their parent was by becoming an activist of some sort. Similar to confronting an abusive parent on someone else’s behalf, these participants confronted public issues on a more global level. Specifically, participants described devoting their lives to helping other people (“everything I do is based on trying to help other people” [Interview #9]) and asserting a
sense of autonomy. In this regard, becoming an activist was a way for participants to both remind themselves that the abuse they suffered (perpetrated by their parent or parents) was wrong and to help others who might be suffering from similar abuse. A conversation with a participant unfolds:

BARB: So everything fell into place and I became an activist. So then I was able to express myself through my political activities …

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel like the, um, your involvement with political activism was a way you were distancing yourself from them?

BARB: Yep. Yep. Um, I think to a certain extent, uh, from both my parents, I didn’t understand it then. I thought, uh, it was initially it was just a reaction to my father and then finding my niche and identifying myself with that. And uh, growing out of my cocoon within the family to becoming an adult, uh gradually. Um, what was your question again?

INTERVIEWER: I asked you whether, um, becoming an activist was a way you distanced yourself?

BARB: Yes. Yes. Uh, definitely and that was actually, um, so maybe this activism should be the second chapter and it should be, the title should be The Turning Point. (Interview #34)

Barb explained that although she started to become an activist as a reaction to her father she then continued to construct a sense of self that was separate from her parents. Put differently, Barb, through her activism, was able to express beliefs divergent from her parents’. She described this as the turning point, a time when she was able to become an activist in order to maintain some of the distance she accomplished. Another participant explained that being an activist was a way for her to say a final farewell to her mother:

JUNE: I told her that I was volunteering with RVAP [Rape Victims Advocacy Program] in [city] and she was mad that I made a false identity pretending what had happened. And that she basically has rights to me because she birthed me and that one day I'll come around and have a relationship with her and she can't believe that I'm still making allegations … I think I just needed a final farewell. And just give her a chance to hear what happened. (Interview #46)

Because of the sexual abuse June suffered as a young woman, she decided to volunteer with RVAP. When she told her mother, her mother responded negatively, providing a reminder to June why she accomplished distance in the first place. By becoming a
volunteer and explaining it to her mother, June was able to disregard her mother’s “rights” and finally communicate the end of the relationship.

“I Got a Tattoo”

The communicative practice, “I got a tattoo”, albeit atypical, illustrates the communicative work that symbols can accomplish in creating a family identity. Although legally changing one’s name might also do this symbolic work, participants were also able to use symbols to (de)construct their family without the gravitas of the legal discourse. Specifically, one participant got a tattoo with her family as a way to define membership. She explains:

SOPHIE: And uh, I think starting around the age of 13 we had talked about the idea of getting a tattoo just to symbolize all the shit we've been through, so for five years we talked about it and designed it and consulted with some tattoo artists when I turned 18 and we consulted with a bunch of tattoo artists and uh, Christmas eve of 2001, right after my brother and I turned 18 we went to the tattoo parlor and all got our tattoos and uh, we were really proud of them, I think I might have been the only kid in the whole high school with a tattoo, and um, we spent a long time planning that and I think my junior year or my senior year.

INTERVIEWER: Was the tattoo was with you, your brother and your sister?

SOPHIE: And my mom. By getting a tattoo to represent all that they had been through together, Sophie and her family constructed a family identity that did not include Sophie’s father. This might come as no surprise considering tattoos are often used to communicate social identity and survived tribulations (Phelan & Hunt, 1998). Often associated with gangs, tattoos accomplish identity work that provides a visual representation to others that they have somehow earned membership (Phelan & Hunt). Thus, by getting a tattoo with her entire family, Sophie was able to construct a different meaning of family and maintain distance by symbolically excluding her father from that familial membership.

Overall, this supra theme depicts communicative practices adult children enacted only once to both accomplish and maintain distance with their parent or parents. As mentioned previously, even one-time practices were not enough for adult children to
increase or maintain the distance that they desired. Thus, participants also described at least one continuous practice. Whether or not adult children enacted these continuous practices appeared to heavily influence their position on the estrangement continuum.

**Continuous Practices**

*Continuous practices* are those that adult children had to repeatedly enact in order to maintain the distance they had accomplished or to increase the distance between themselves and their parent or parents. Similar to the one-time practices, these continuous practices served to do both the work of accomplishing and maintaining distance, although more often were enacted as maintenance strategies. In instances where adult children never had a direct confrontation with their parent or parents in the form of an initial declaration or third party intervention, some participants simply engaged in these continuous practices; that because they were constantly enacted, served both accomplish and maintenance goals. Seven practices constitute this supra-theme and will be detailed below: (1) “I stopped communicating with my parents – and never spoke with them again”, (2) “I avoided my parents – and only interacted with them on my own terms”, (3) “I stayed away”, (4) “I did not visit when they were sick”, (5) “I treated them like a stranger/acquaintance/non-family”, (6) “I colluded with my family”, and (7) “I told my story to others.”

“I Stopped Communicating With My Parents – And Never Spoke With Them Again”

Perhaps the most pervasive communicative practice, *“I stopped communicating with my parents – and never spoke with them again”* depicts the importance of communication in maintaining relationships regardless of whether they are traditionally thought of as nonvoluntary. Specifically, this practice emphasizes that parent-child communication is not inherent but rather a choice by both relational parties. Braxton recounts:

BRAXTON: Yeah, so I guess I went to college and just realized that unlike at home I'm free to make my own choices so, I guess, the first easiest thing I did was that I would never text or call him. Um, I would always do that with my mom
and they're still married, they still live together so obviously he noticed and that bothered him. So that's the first thing I did. (Interview #7)

In this example, Braxton discussed his realization that he did not have to talk to his father if he did not want to communicate with him. Specifically, his physical distance facilitated by going away to college made face-to-face communication less frequent.

Furthermore, Braxton’s account illustrates the impact of the family system. As he described, he continued to call and text with his mom. But, considering his mom was still married to his dad at that point, his dad realized that the communication cessation applied specifically to him. In another account Mandy explained that her choice not to talk to her parents also influenced the entire family system:

MANDY: So the most, you know there have been times over the years where I was just not talking to her as much as she would want. If she talked with me as much as she wanted to she would talk to me every day and um, it’s only been in the last year that we have had a very long span. I have not seen my parents since October of last year and my children have not seen their grandparents and that has been a very deliberate choice to, to not interact with them and not talk with them on the telephone and not respond to her various pleas for attention. (Interview #16)

Mandy’s account revealed that by not talking to her parents, her children also have not seen their grandparents. Here, communication cessation influenced two generations in the family, again emphasizing the importance of communication in building, maintaining, and dissolving relationships. Similar to Braxton, Mandy specifically chose not to talk to her parents, which in turn communicatively deconstructed their relationship.

In addition to ceasing communicative contact as a way to create initial distance, participants also eliminated interaction as a way to maintain distance with their parents. As previously detailed in the discussion of ultimatums (i.e., initial declaration practices), communication cessation was often the way adult children maintained their distance. In fact a lot of participants ended their distancing account with the phrase, “and I never spoke to her again” (Diana, Interview #5) or with the explanation, “I just didn’t communicate with them” (Nadia, Interview #17). Another participant described how he continued to avoid his mother’s phone calls:
I really didn’t answer phone calls for a long while. Um – if I got – I would get regular, almost daily… weekly phone calls from my mom. I didn’t answer them because I knew, I mean I had caller ID before I had a cell phone, and I’d just be like, “Ok, it’s my mom, don’t need to answer it… don’t need to.” (Interview #47)

Max conveyed that despite his mom’s persistence, he actively refused to communicate with her. Other participants similarly recount:

LUCAS: I mean, we don't talk to each other, we don't, I mean there is no communication at all, with him at all, whatsoever. (Interview #44)

ZOE: I mean I don’t call her. I don’t, I don’t have any kind of contact with her at all. You know, I didn’t contact her on Mother’s Day or her birthday was in March and I just, I didn’t do anything to contact her. (Interview #32)

Taken together, this practice emphasizes the importance of communication between relational parties in maintaining a relationship. Ultimately, the salience and prevalence of this practice illustrates the need for estrangement scholars to heavily consider the role of communication in the estrangement process and the influence it has on relationships, regardless of whether they are perceived as nonvoluntary. In fact, almost every participant said that stopping communication with their parent was a way they either accomplished or maintained estrangement with their parent or parents. The prevalence of this practice suggests that cognitive distance or “emotional cutoff” (see Bowen, 1978) might not be sufficient for conceptualizing estrangement.

“I Avoided Them – And Only Interacted With Them On My Own Terms”

Sometimes participants did not want to or were not able to completely cease communication with their parent or parents. In these cases, participants had to enact a multitude of strategies to avoid their parent and to continue to interact with them on their own terms. Of note, although many participants enacted avoidance practices, it is important to clarify that their desire for contact fluctuated over the course of the estrangement process. Thus, almost all participants enacted avoidance strategies at some point but might have stopped if they found another practice more effective for their period in their life (e.g., complete communication cessation). This practice, then, is another illustration of how adult children might find themselves at different places on the
estrangement continuum at different times in their life. Although less explicit in communicating a desire for distance than some practices, participants nevertheless described avoidance as an effective means of creating and maintaining distance. For example, in response to being asked how her father reacted to her avoiding him, Roxy reports, “He didn’t like it. He could tell that’s what we were doing” (Interview #24). Specifically, avoidance strategies include: (1) reducing contact hours (2) physically hiding from the parent or parents, (3) only communicating at a superficial level/ignoring the parent, and (4) lying to the parent. Overall, these four practices, detailed below, helped participants accomplish and maintain distance when more drastic measures (i.e., initial declarative practices) were either impractical or not desired.

“I Reduced My Contact with My Parent”

Participants discussed reducing contact with their parent or parents in two very specific ways. First, participating in extracurricular activities was one way for participants avoided their parent or parents. In particular, this was a distancing practice most often used by children who were still physically living under their parent’s roof. When asked what was the first action she took to distance herself from her mom, Xenia describes, “Um, I got involved in a lot of school and sports activities so that I could be away from the house” (Interview #31). Xenia made it very clear that she did not get involved because she thought extracurricular activities were fun or she wanted to be with her friends, but rather she wanted to get away from the house. Another participant explains:

CONNIE: I swam, I was involved in sports, and I tried to have as much involvement outside of the home as I could. It wasn't always successful because you think you're going to get taken somewhere and then they pick up the drink and that's done, you're not going anywhere, you're just stuck. (Interview #4)

Like Xenia, Connie identified sports as a way to create physical distance from her mother. By trying to stay outside of the home, it is reasonable to conclude that participants who were trying to avoid their parents also were attempting to decrease their
communicative interactions. Thus, indirectly, we again see the ways communication, or the lack thereof, is essential to the estrangement process.

Second, some participants discussed how getting a job was a communicative practice in which they engaged to actively avoid their parent. For most of the participants who gave voice to this practice, employment was another means of physical removal. One participant shares:

ROXY: I just had really very little contact with him during law school. Summers I would come home during college during the summer, I would always have a job, would work really hard and by the last three years I had a job that took me on overnight trips so that it was good money but the added bonus was that I didn't have to be around the house much. (Interview #24)

In this example, Roxy was able to work at a job that took her on overnight trips away from the house. Thus, she was able to avoid her father and make money over the summer. As it happens being employed was not only a means of avoiding their parents, but also a way for participants to gain financial independence. For example, Horace reveals:

And when I, at, at the age of fourteen I got the only job a fourteen year old could in [state], a, detasseling corn. And I worked that for three years and then I started getting other jobs as well. Basically, earning the money that I'll need for when I turn eighteen to get out of the house, get my own place as quickly as I could get out. Uh, so, so that’s when it really started. (Interview #29)

Most likely because he was so young, Horace did not feel like he could get out of the house and get his own place. Thus, he got the only job he could in anticipation of being able to move out when he was eighteen. Getting a job, then, served to both help adult children escape the immediate presence of their parent or parents and to provide them with resources to continue to distance themselves in the future. Unlike teenagers and young adults who might typically see getting a job as part of the life course, these participants got jobs with the distinct desire to distance themselves from a parent or parent.

“I Hid From Them”
Other times, staying out of the physical proximity of the parent or parents was essential if the participant wanted to be physically safe. Another participant explains:

ADELINE: Yeah. Um, my dad was a very violent man. Um, and so if you could hear things going wrong with either my mother or my father, the best idea was to hide. So, um, I had some good hiding spots like there was a good tree in our neighbor’s yard, um, which I stashed like a backpack, you know, just for like, just in case. Um, and I would also hide in the garage and this, this sounds crazy but it was in a storage trashcan. So it wasn’t used for trash but it was a storage one so it was clean. But, I would hide in that and my siblings knew where to find me if they wanted to. (Interview #33)

Adeline conveyed the importance of hiding when she heard her father and mother fighting. This was such a common practice that she developed her own specific hiding place where she had a backpack “just in case” she might have had to presumably flee. Furthermore, Adeline described hiding in an empty trashcan where only her siblings would know where to find her. Staying out of the way, then, was a way to maintain distance and preserve one’s physical safety.

Other times, participants discussed hiding in a specific place where they could also mentally escape. In particular, adult children often remembered reading as a way to avoid their parents. By reading a book, the participants were able to mentally transport themselves to another place. Green and Brock (2004) argue in their transportation theory that stories can transport individuals into a narrative world where the reader can temporarily lose access to some real-world facts in favor of accepting the narrative world the author has created. As one participant describes:

KEVIN: Um, the first thing I started to do was I started to go to the library and I started to read, that's one of the first things I'd do to start to get away from him.

INTERVIEWER: The library, was that a specific place you went to?

KEVIN: Yes. It really was. I remember that being a very specific place I went to to [sic] find books. Like books were my escape time. I would go and read a book and it was my escape time. I would go into my head and I would go into the book and I have a very vivid imagination from that time. I have what I call my super focus. I can be reading something and completely tune out the whole world because of at that time in my life with all the fighting and chaos I could always be reading a book and tune out everything. And it drives people crazy because I don't do it intentionally, but it's because of those moments in my life, I've trained myself to tune out everything else. It helps me now at school but it can still drive
my friends crazy. Trying to talk me and I don't hear it. Because the book would be the world I would go into, my own reality. And as a kid, to me now it makes sense. (Interview #43)

Kevin escaped the realities of his life that was full of “fighting and chaos” by immersing himself in a book. In this regard, the library became a place full of opportunity to create distance between himself and his father. As Kevin described, when he was reading a book he had “super focus” and was immune to others communicating both to and around him. Thus, reading served as a way to simultaneously avoid interaction and create an imaginary safe environment.

“I Only Communicated at a Superficial Level/I Ignored Them”

Unlike many parent-child relationships described by my participants, sometimes parents actively tried to engage the child. In these cases, adult children described shutting down and ignoring the parent as a way to control the interaction. A woman participant reveals:

LUCILLE: I don't think I said very much. I think I shut down. I think the communication just became very superficial. It was about um, I stopped talking about my personal life, I stopped talking about my friends, I stopped bringing I stopped having my parents and my friends interact with one another, um, I got call waiting, caller ID, this was before cell phones were common, I made sure that my interactions with my parents were very separate from the rest of my life and when I talked to them it was only about certain topics. (Interview #50)

Lucille conveyed how she began communicating at a superficial level, shutting down in order to maintain distance with her parents. Instead of completely ceasing communication like many of the participants, Lucille simply did not communicate about anything personal. Lucille also discussed how she separates her interactions from the rest of her life and engages in topic avoidance (see Dailey & Palomares, 2004; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995) to shut down and maintain distance. Eva elaborates on what it means to shut down:

INTERVIEWER: Okay. So when you say shutting down, what does that include?

EVA: I just, mostly I just listen, well I don't really listen, I just sit there and don't pay attention to him. He just talks and I don't respond, or I just do what you're doing, just smile and just so he thinks I'm paying attention but it's like I really am. And I just don't react to him … Well, if we're arguing, then I just shut down. I
just go to the other room and stop talking to him. And we don't interact. And one thing I've noticed about him as he's gotten older is that he wants a lot of interaction so that's kind of my way of punishing him. You don't get my interaction if you're going to be mean to me. And I just go to the other room and he'll start talking to me and I just go to the other room and start watching TV or something. (Interview #6)

Eva expressed how shutting down involved her personal choice to not respond or not react. Sometimes this meant denying her father the interaction that he craved.

Communication and interaction, then, can be leveraged as a reward for good behavior and a punishment for transgressions. Thus, communicatively shutting down helped participants control interactions with their parent or parents, ultimately allowing them to maintain established distance.

“I Lied to Them”

Some participants were only able to avoid their parents by lying to them. A participant confesses:

HANNAH: I wouldn’t tell her when I was going home. Uh, if I was going home to visit, it actually started by accident. I, at first I would tell her because I felt bad. I felt terrible. I would like go home for Christmas and I knew that she, for the most part she was alone after this point. My stepdad was still doing, was still doing time and then after he got out, he really didn’t want much to do with her again. She was, she was living in a halfway house or was just sort of bouncing from motels so I felt terrible and then I would tell her I was going home and then I would go home and the entire time I was with her all I was thinking was oh my god why did I do this. And then one time, I, I cancelled a trip and then decided last minute to go. And so I showed up and I spent the entire, it was like four or five days that I was home and I didn’t see her once and I was just like, I could just not tell her. Why didn’t I think of this before? So, I would make up excuses, uh, reasons that I wasn’t coming home for Christmas or Thanksgiving. My brother would lie for me and say that I wasn’t around. (Interview #42)

Hannah revealed that she accidentally discovered that deceiving her mother would allow her the freedom to come home without having to interact with her mother. After she discovered that this practice is effective, Hannah actively began coming up with excuses and even allowed her brother to lie on her behalf. This example alludes to the way that adult children were able to gain some control over the interactions with their parents when they did not want to completely cease communicating but did want to set some boundaries.
Furthermore, in order to maintain the distance they were able to achieve by avoiding their parents, adult children described doing a lot of work to make sure they only interacted with their parents when and how they wanted. A participant and I discussed:

INTERVIEWER: Did you do anything to maintain that distance?

FAITH: Um, yeah, because I lived in another town, I would occasionally see them, I went out of state for college, I would occasionally come home for Thanksgiving or Christmas, but if I said I'm not coming home this year they would say okay. There was never any, we miss you and want to see how you're doing or anything like that. It was more like I got in touch with them and said that I had thought about coming home or coming to your house for Christmas it was like yeah, sure go ahead or yeah, that's fine. Nobody was ever terribly excited about the whole thing. If I decided to, I did, if I didn't I wouldn't. They were never, I was never, so yes, I was physically apart from them and you know, during that 10 years and if I came home for Thanksgiving or Christmas five times it was fine, if I didn't it was fine. And since I lived in another state, I just stayed there during the summer and never came home. (Interview #8)

Faith revealed that she would come home for the holidays when she wanted to and her parents did not appear to care either way. Throughout this excerpt, she made a point to talk about the apathy of her parents. Again, this suggests that not all parents want or care whether they interact with their children. Other times, participants decided for themselves that they only wanted to spend a short time visiting. For example, Kevin describes the 24-hour rule:

KEVIN: There's a point where, and I don't even remember when I started doing this, but I started applying the 24-hour rule. I only spend 24 hours when I visit my family and I find some reason to leave and it works wonderful for me. Because my dad loves to pick fights and stir things up and cause tension, it's like his favorite things to do, I don't know why.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say the 24-hour rule is a way you distance yourself?

KEVIN: Yeah, because I've lied to them about why I have to leave. And my husband knows it. And he's okay with it. It's just another distance thing but it just makes it so much better than to spend more time than I need to because the more time I'm around that situation worsens. So I find it better to not spend the time to allow the situation become something else. (Interview #43)

Similar to those participants who lied to their parents, Kevin described making up excuses to leave after being at home 24 hours or less. Over time, Kevin realized that the
more time he spent at home the more likely he would have conflict with his father. In order to avoid the conflict, Kevin preemptively removed himself from the situation. Thus, we can see directly how the avoidance practices, when continued, also helped to maintain the distance.

“I Stayed Away”

Once adult children were able to physically move away (see one-time practice “I moved away”) many talked about also staying away. Unlike the children adult who actively avoided interacting with their parents, this practice characterizes the behavior of participants who, for whatever reason, did not want or did not need to interact with their parent in any way. In fact, “staying away” was often the only maintenance practice participants discussed in conjunction with moving away. Georgia explains:

GEORGIA Um, I think I've stayed away. I grew up in [city] and I have very rarely visited, and that goes back to when I was 18 and moved away. Undergrad, after high school, I don't go back much, I don't like to go back much, I don't want to bump into people in the grocery store, I don't want to, it's hard for me to be there still to be there in those places. And it's still scary, my dad doesn't go out much, he doesn't really have friends, or a good network, he doesn't tend to go out but I still fear bumping into him in public there. I fear that he is going to see me and rage at me and I don't want that in my life. So I physically don't go back much, maybe once a year for a couple days at this point. And when I do, I don't go to the area where my parents live, that's for sure. Um, so that makes, I think that's a little strange but other than that it's become a non-issue. (Interview #9)

Georgia explained that after she was able to physically move away, then she continuously maintained distance by not returning often to visit. She conveyed that she was afraid of running into her father and made a point not to go to the area where her parents live. As interpreted from this excerpt, it is clear that when Georgia did return “home”, it was not to visit her family but rather to see other people. Thus, participants initiated the distance by moving away and maintained that distance by also physically staying away.

Another way participants stayed away was by becoming financially independent. Another participant relays:

PHOEBE: I think that um, becoming more financially independent and having our own home, our own cars where we weren't relying on my parents for anything. Um, definitely makes it a lot easier in a situation where there is a disconnect
where you feel like you have to compromise your principles in order to get something. I don't know, that probably sounds bad. So, you know. Things like that do happen. And I do have a sister who does that quite frequently. And she'll kind of roll over in order to get things from my mother. Um, that's just not something that I will do. (Interview #23)

Phoebe described the benefits and costs that come with being financially independent. She explained that she no longer has to compromise her principles, unlike her sister, but she now does not receive things from her mother. She appeared adamant, however, that staying away and being financial independent was worth any cost.

In addition to physically moving away and becoming financially independent, participants described giving up the possibility of interacting with their other family members and participating in family rituals. This facet of the practice emphasizes the way that distancing can affect multiple members of the family system. The willingness to stop attending family gatherings suggests that even though adult children can create distance with a parent or parents specifically, they might also have to remove themselves from the entire family system if they want to be able to maintain that distance. As Ellie explains, “Um, but I, um, I distanced myself from him in that, um, I didn’t voluntarily seek out his company. I didn’t, um, I would often avoid family events” (Interview #39).

In addition to generally not seeking out her father, Ellie revealed in this example and throughout her story that she would avoid attending general family functions where she knew her father would be in attendance. Other participants described not attending more ritualized family events as opposed to family gatherings in general. One adult child explains:

EVA: The first thing I know I intentionally did was probably in the past oh maybe 5-10 years. We do a family dinner every week and I just didn't come over for a while. And I would just try to stay ... I'm not very good at detaching myself from my family, we're so intertwined and we're so close but I just told my mom, I'm not coming over for a while, I can't, I just can't be a part of it because it's too hard for me to be around ... (Interview #6)

In this example, we see a woman who has given up a weekly family ritual in order to distance herself from her father. Specifically, she flagged that this was difficult because her family is “so intertwined” and “so close”. Thus, she conveyed that her desire for
distance was so great that she was willing to concede something meaningful to her. As discussed in chapters one and two, social realities are produced and maintained through rites, rituals, and other daily activities (Deetz, 2001; Galvin, 2006). By removing themselves from family gatherings, these participants created a reality where they are not a part of that family maintenance practice, which might be an important way of determining family membership in the future.

Harley and Horace continue to explain that they would purposely choose not to attend family gatherings:

HARLEY: Um ... well I don't call her, I let her call me. And when we want to get together for holidays, I'll just come up with, Oh sorry, I've already gotten this planned or whatever. (Interview #10)

HORACE: But, uh, yeah. But, I'd just, I'd always just come up with an excuse and, and like, you know Christmas..."Oh you have to come down for Christmas" or you know, "How are you working?" I actually found myself a job where they paid you extra money for working Christmas. (Interview #29)

Harley, perhaps, used deception to avoid holidays and Horace went out of his way to find a job that would allow him to work on Christmas. Staying away from family gatherings was not only a way for adult children to avoid their parents, but also is particularly meaningful because of the role rituals play in constituting a family. Rituals help families define membership, connect on multiple levels, and generate feelings of closeness (Galvin, 2006). By actively not participating, these adult children were able help construct themselves out of their family, ultimately helping them maintain distance.

“I Did Not Visit When They Were Sick”

The communicative practice “I did not visit when they were sick” was particularly salient and distressing to the adult children in this study. Although this practice might bear resemblance to avoidance or staying away, the act of not helping their parent or parents when they were in need characterizes what many adult children cited as a gross cultural expectation violation. Thus, one way participants were able to maintain distance was to purposefully fail to live up to the ideal of a “good child”. In this regard, this
communicative practice violated cultural norms to such a degree that it went one step beyond avoidance and staying away. Specifically, Mandy reports:

Various things have happened over the past year that um, some people might interpret as me being cruel or unfair but she was in the hospital for more than a week, um, due to pancreatitis which can be very serious and um, she is a diabetic who has chosen not to treat her diabetes in traditional ways for many years. Um, not that that’s necessarily related to the pancreatitis although it can be. Um, so she was in the hospital and in the past if something like that would happen, I would have rushed back. I would have been at her bedside. I would have been her defender and protector and you know, whatever and this time I decided just to, I didn’t have time for one thing. I mean, I’m in school. I’m you know, and she has a lot of family resources in the hometown. She comes from a family of eight kids. Five girls. Three boys. Over the years, all of her sisters have moved back into the hometown so she has four sisters who live in that town who are all, well one of them isn’t retired but several of them are retired and have time and you know, if she needs somebody to visit her in the hospital, they’re there. My youngest brother still lives in the hometown and then my dad lives in the hometown so I didn’t feel like she was alone in the world and I was the only person who could go and help her. (Interview #16)

Mandy explained that when her mother was hospitalized she did not go and visit. She acknowledged that some people might interpret her behavior as cruel or unfair. Perhaps even more interesting, Mandy spent a lot of time explaining why it was not necessary that she visit her mother. This anticipation of cultural judgment corresponds to what Mead (1982) refers to as the generalized other or what Baxter (2011) labels the distal not-yet spoken. What is important about these concepts is the fact that they illustrate the difficulty participants might have had in executing this particular communicative practice. Unlike a behavior such as going away to college that might not garner any inquiry, participants flagged not visiting a sick parent as a significant cultural expectation violation. Even after being sexually abused by her stepfather, Gwen’s family still expected her to visit her ailing stepfather and attend his funeral. She reflects:

Gwen: My family called, he died at some point. I think I must have been here. Because there were several months that I left my husband. And I think my stepfather died during that time period. And I remember my family calling and asking me if I was going to go to the funeral, he was sick and in the hospital for two weeks, and they said he was asking for me and I did not go. And then they called and asked if I was going to go to the funeral and I did not go. The fact that they even asked ... (Interview #41)
Gwen was surprised that her family thought to even ask her to attend her stepfather’s funeral given their relational history. Unlike Mandy, however, she appeared to be less concerned with the anticipated cultural expectation. Yet, ultimately Gwen’s interpretation was anomalous. Most participants had a hard time refraining from visiting their sick parent. In particular, Greg spent a lot of time talking about being a “good son” and the negative reactions he got from his other siblings for being too tough on his mother (Interview #22). Taken together, this communicative practice conveyed the cost of maintaining distance and the commitment many participants showed in ensuring that distance was maintained.

“I Treated Them as Strangers/Acquaintances/Non-Family”

Participants were able to create boundaries when they began to treat their parent as a stranger or an acquaintance in general instead of a parent in particular. By interacting with their parent or parents as someone without the same relational history, legal link, or biological tie, adult children were able to reframe their interactions. In particular, this practice did not necessarily require the participants to tell their parent that the relationship was over or even to tell them off, but emerged when adult children described fundamentally interacting with the parent as if their familial ties did not exist. For example, Betty describes:

So when I was in AP English, I started going to him for some guidance and help and then in 12th grade I remember getting his advice, so I remember calling him and explaining my assignment and he would answer my questions, you know, it was like having a tutor or something. He was like a TA. So it wasn't like a father-daughter relationship but it felt like there was finally something we could connect on, like you know, like basically academia beyond the elementary and middle school level. And so I would, you know I would call him with schoolwork and that would be more or less the extent of our conversations. (Interview #2)

In this example, Betty said that she was able to have a somewhat functional relationship when she stopped treating her father as a parent and interacted with him as if he were a tutor or TA. Unlike adolescents who might ask their parents for help with their homework as an everyday interaction, Betty suggested that communicating with her
“father” about homework was the only time she spoke with him. She specifically commented that it was not a parent-child relationship but something less intimate. Ironically, this lack of closeness helped facilitate a seemingly positive interaction. Yet, by treating her parent as just another person, she stripped her father from the power the culture would typically grant him as a parent. In doing so, she was able to accomplish distance with him and illustrate the power and importance of talk and interaction.

Participants also deconstructed the familial relationship by calling their parent or parents by their first name. I converse with another participant:

INTERVIEWER: Is there any other actions you did to either accomplish or maintain distance with your mom?

JANEY: Um, she, Sarah is my mother, and I actually don't call her mother anymore, I call her Sarah.

INTERVIEWER: When did you start to call her Sarah?

JANEY: I started doing that about two and half, three years ago … As far as I'm concerned I no longer have a mother … So but, I'd say within six months to a year of me distancing myself I started calling her Sarah. (Interview #12)

Janey explained that after she created the initial distance she began calling her mother by her first name. Although calling Sarah by her first name might have indicated distance to members of Janey’s social network, Janey specifically noted that calling her “mother” by her first name was something she did to either accomplish or maintain distance. As Galvin explains, “labeling orients familial relationships such as ‘brother’ or ‘mother.’ Labeling establishes expectations” (p. 10). Put different, language constitutes and alters the relationship. By calling a person a mother, members of the cultural attributes relational meaning, drawing on what they know about being a mother to make assumptions about that relationship. Yet, stripping Sarah of the label mother not only signaled distance to members of the cultural but also helped Janey deconstruct the relationship for herself. In this regard, language both constructs and deconstructs what it means to be a family.

“I Colluded With My Family”
Alternatively, some participants co-opted the help of their immediate and extended families in order to maintain distance with their parent or parents. This practice, then, suggests that maintaining distance might “take a village.” In other words, adult children might have to negotiate with other family members in order to keep themselves away from their parent or keep their parents away from themselves. Of note, this communicative practice was typically enacted after the adult children presented the distance to their immediate and extended family. Yet, participants did not identify this as a way to present or sustain the estrangement (RQ2), but rather as a way to maintain the distance they were able to accomplish. Hannah narrates:

HANNAH: I also would use my brother because my brother also lived in the same city and we would, this is a point at which we both had cell phones for the first time. If he was with her, he would text her and let me know so it was safe to go home and I would do the same thing. So we, we sort of like kept each other in the loop. “Do you know where mom is? No I don’t.” So that meant that both of us could potentially end up with a visit from her. So for two years that’s kind of the thing that happened. When she would go missing for any particular period of time, uh, my brother and I were both her points of contact for her probation officer at that point. So she would go missing, we usually knew that we’d be getting a call or a visit from probation officers so we would keep each other in the loop for that as well. (Interview # 42)

Hannah explained that she and her brother had a system that let each other know when it was “safe to go home.” Otherwise, both Hannah and her brother might have had unexpected visits from their mother. Thus, in order to maintain distance, they informed each other when they knew of her whereabouts. Other participants colluded with their extended family in the presence of the estranged parent or parents. For example, another participant shares:

EVA: Um, oh yeah, there's another thing we kind of do, and it's not just me, but it's in a family setting. We go out to dinner once a week and we try to sit at the table so we're not sitting by him.

INTERVIEWER: What do you want to call that?

EVA: Dinner. Dinner Roulette. It's kind of funny because it's my sister-in-law who usually gets stuck sitting next to him.
INTERVIEWER: Tell me about Dinner Roulette.

EVA: Well, usually the kids try their hardest to sit, not all of this is due to his, well I guess it is all due to his, well I guess not negative behavior but negative, you didn't say negative behavior, but you did say negative relationship. My nieces and nephews usually want to sit by me, I'm the cool aunt I guess. I get to be the fun one. They usually fight over who I'm sitting between. Um, I used to have six nieces and nephews in town so when we'd go I would have six different kids fighting so we would have to take turns and then it's like everyone always tries to sit down at one end of the table and then all the kids try to get a parent, or my mom sitting next to them so they're blocked in and don't have to sit next to grandpa. And so we always put him at one end of the table. So he usually only has the opportunity of one person sitting next to him. It sounds so childish. Half the stuff we do sounds so childish. Um, so all of us try and fill in. (Interview #6)

Eva explained how her entire family worked to distance themselves from her father or “grandpa” on a weekly, continuous, basis. Together, the family physically tried to separate themselves and avoid interaction. Perhaps surprisingly, the family does not simply try to accommodate Eva’s desire for distance but also communicates the family’s desire for distance when they play dinner roulette. Furthermore, this example suggests that physical distance might take on several meanings in the estrangement process. For some participants, physical distance might mean moving to a different state or country, but as we see with Eva’s family, the meaningful distance established around a dinner table also works to deconstruct the relationship.

Overall, both of these examples revealed the importance the extended family plays when the adult child still might like to retain some contact with the parent. Unlike one-time maintenance practices that completely kept the parent at a distance, this one specifically illustrated the way the entire family was implicated when at least one member purposely was trying to keep another at a distance. In sum, this communicative practice in particular emphasizes the ways participants must leverage maintenance strategies as a continuous distance negotiation.

“I Told My Story to Others”

Finally, one way for participants to maintain distance with their parent or parents was to talk and write about their negative relationship and share their stories with others. According to these participants, talking and writing about the experiences that lead to the
estrangement helped remind the adult children why that distance was important, thus helping the participants maintain distance. Of note, participants did not talk about sharing their stories as a way to present the distance to their social network members (RQ2) as the primary reason for their telling, but similarly to “I colluded with my family” enacted this practice as a distance maintenance strategy. Specifically, writing about their parent and sharing it with others provided the adult children with a way to cope with and make sense of the negative experiences in their lives. Thus, this practice corresponds to research on narrative that suggests that telling your story, whether in writing or orally, helps individuals create coherence and cope with distressing events (Becker, 1997; Bochner, Ellis, and Tillmann-Healy, 1998; Koenig Kellas, 2008). As one adult child describes:

KAYLA: In high school and college I always wrote about my dad and I think it was more of a coping mechanism and I put my thoughts onto paper and maybe you know, give some sort of um, since my family wasn’t listening to me I guess, give somebody else who would maybe would listen or read it the insight into what was going on… I always got positive feedback … So, that’s been huge like, that’s been something that I’ve used to my advantage to um, cope with the whole distancing thing for sure.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say that you’ve used that more as coping or more as a way to accomplish and maintain it?

KAYLA: Um, more as a coping. Like, I well actually both because it copes with the uh, emotional part of how I’m feeling about distancing but it also helps with distancing because you know, I see like I’ll write about the situations he put me through and things like that and then I see oh well you know, I can’t let up now because this happened. And then, oh, things like that so um, so yeah it helped with both for sure.

INTERVIEWER: So the writing about it helped reinforce….

KAYLA: Why I was distancing myself and it helped with understanding, you know, why I did need to.

INTERVIEWER: How often would you say you wrote?

KAYLA: Once a semester probably for at least a paper. Like, if it was a new class that I had to do, it was usually something that was free write so I had to do something like that and it was always about my dad or if it was about my mom there would be parts of my dad into that one. So, there was always something in there that connected that whole thing. (Interview #14)
Kayla continuously (every semester) wrote about her experience so that she could both cope and remind herself why she sought to accomplish distance from her father. Secondly, Kayla suggested that writing about her negative relationship with her father was a way to disclose her situation to her teachers when her own family would not listen. In addition to the catharsis she might have felt from the disclosure (see Afifi & Steuber, 2009), Kayla relayed that her teachers always provided her with positive feedback and that she was able to get a scholarship by retelling her story (i.e., emotional and tangible support; see Goldsmith, 2004).

Participants also shared that talking to a counselor about what happened helped them cope, validate their distancing practices, and explore new practices to help maintain distance. Albeit the reasons for sharing their story were perhaps different (e.g., for catharsis or treatment, etc.), participants emphasized that communicating about the experience was generally very helpful. For example, one participant explains:

BRAXTON: So then, um, I came back to college, and we can call this one Therapy, and I just realized that I just have so much and I just couldn't deal with it all by myself and so at first I went to University Counseling and then they knew it would take more than the six sessions they're allotted so they referred me out. And so then I started seeing my therapist. And, it was great, it was really productive. Um, because we just talked about you know, like why dad might be the way he is and why I react to him the way I do. And then, you know, it was great to go through these issues and provide constructive feedback and understand and help me. So that was great.

INTERVIEWER: Did going to counseling help you maintain distance?

BRAXTON: It gave me new strategies to create emotional distance. Um because, while I'm in [city], I'm physically distanced, but I still was carrying around so much hate, and anger, and sadness. Just like the whole gambit. So we worked on strategies to create emotional distance you know? Recognizing that it was him, it was his life, and his choices and they were not a reflection on me. And, you know, I'm still a great person, I'm still doing all of these good things, regardless of whether he approves. So, I think I had those tools I was able to create the emotional distance that I wasn't able to have before. Because even when, during freshman year, I was still angry and things so that was really like "Rrrr", and then so I was finally able to create the emotional space between us and then I was able to come to peace with a lot of those things.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk to me about how you did that?
Braxton described the way counseling helped him make attributions for his negative relationship with his dad and facilitated “constructive feedback”. He specifically described learning to create emotional distance or what scholars might describe as learning to regulate one’s emotions. Emotion regulation (ER) refers to the way individuals attempt to influence the type of emotion they experience, when they experience those emotions, and how they both experience and express those emotions (Gross, 2008). Thus, communicating with a therapist was one way Braxton learned to regulate his emotions.

Furthermore, Braxton not only relied on communication to learn ER strategies, but he also engaged in communicative practices, such as avoiding verbal conflict or talking about common interests, as a way to maintain distance. Perhaps counterintuitive on its face, Braxton described that avoiding fights helped maintain distance, as opposed to increasing closeness. By communicating in seemingly healthy ways (e.g., focusing on agreement), Braxton was able to successfully regulate his emotions. As research suggests, the way a family communicates is an essential factor affecting an individual’s ability to regulate his or her emotions (Denham, 1998; Morris, Silk, Steinberg Myers, & Robinson, 2007). In addition to helping adult children regulate their emotions, counselors also helped participants by providing a disinterested perspective. Phoebe narrates:

Phoebe: Um, I again, we went to counseling and we tried to deal with some of those issues and through talking with the counselor um, he kind of helped us decide that that was a viable option for us. Given that the set of circumstance that we were dealing with. Not everybody can come to a resolution. Sometimes you just have to come up with a strategy that minimizes the disruptions that could come up along the way. So that helped. It helped to hear that from somebody not right in the midst of the situation. Kind of a more third party observer. Granted, he couldn't see the interactions but we could describe the interactions. I think that was very good. He could come and give us some advice. (Interview #23)
Phoebe began by alluding to the fact that counseling was an ongoing part of her estrangement journey “I, again, we went to counseling”). She discussed that her counselor provided her with a third party observation and discussed how not everyone can come to a resolution, ultimately helping her maintain distance. Taken together, counselors helped many participants by offering a safe place to discuss the negative relationship and by offering practical solutions to maintain distance.

In sum, the most robust supra-theme, continuous practices, emphasizes that creating distance might not necessarily be the most difficult part of the dissolution process. On the contrary, participants discussed the difficulties they faced responding to not only the pressure from their family members to reconcile but also the perceived pressure they felt from violating cultural expectations of family relationships. Thus, participants engaged in practices to remind themselves of and reinforce the reasons for why they sought distance as a way to maintain that distance in addition to practices that actually functioned to keep the parent communicatively and physically distant. This negotiation was particularly complicated when participants still wanted to retain some contact with their family. Thus, continuous practices were very important on adjusting where the participant was on the estrangement continuum. Perhaps of interest, some participants did the discursive work to strip their “family member” of their title/role essentially suggesting that the parent is just somebody that they used to know. This practice illuminates that even the term “estranged from” recognizes some relationship such as the case with the labels ex-husband or ex-girlfriend. Thus, these adult children might require a different term to mark their experience.

**Summary of RQ1 Findings**

Overall, adult children enacted many communicative practices to distance themselves from the unhealthy relationships they had with their parent or parents (see Appendix E). Five communicative practices coalesced to characterize the declarative practices. Another five communicative practices emerge to make the supra-theme, one-
time practices. Finally, seven communicative practices combined to form the continuous practices. Taken together, these 17 communicative practices depict the ways adult children both voluntarily and intentionally accomplish and maintain distance.

As mentioned previously, the number of maintenance practices (a total of 12) suggest that participants had to actively work to maintain distance with their parent or parents, most likely expending even more energy in maintenance than in accomplishing the distance. Maintenance was important for multiple reasons and was often required because of social network interference. One way for participants to avoid unwanted questions was for them to present their estrangement to members of their immediate family, extended family, and social network. In some cases, this disclosure was met with support. In other instances, the estrangement revelation was met with resistance. Thus, participants not only had to disclose their estrangement but also had to work to sustain it. I will discuss these network communicative practices in the next data analysis chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR
DATA ANALYSIS:
EXTERNAL BOUNDARY MANAGEMENT

Context for Findings

The present findings are organized by the second research question posed in chapter one: How do adult children communicatively (a) disclose and (b) sustain their estrangement from a parent(s) to other family members and to social network members such as friends and co-workers? In order to answer this research question, I detail the communicative actions adult children took to disclose and sustain their estrangement to their immediate family, extended family, and social network.

Of note, communicative practices adult children employed to both accomplish and maintain distance sometimes also appear to be doing the work of estrangement disclosure and sustainment. For example, as detailed in Chapter three, Janey began calling her mother Sarah as a way to help her maintain distance. By calling her mother by her first name, she effectively distanced herself but also strips her mother of the relational title to the outside world. Another example of this overlap is illustrated by the communicative practice: “I took legal action.” Again, participants legitimated the distance by amending documents that not only help the adult children gain distance but might also flag to others that there is a significant problem with the relationship. Thus, many communicative practices end up performing internal and external boundary management work simultaneously. The communicative practices, however, appeared in each of their respective categories based on the participant reports. For example, adult children identified legal action as something they did to accomplish and maintain distance as opposed to discussing this practice when they spoke about the ways they communicate the distance to their social network members. Thus, in the spirit of interpretive research, the native’s voice determined the way I report the findings of this chapter.
Similar to the findings from chapter three that illustrate the importance of maintenance practices, participants identified multiple ways to sustain or reinforce the distance with their parent or parents to their social network. Again, the emphasis on maintenance (internal boundary management) and sustainment (external boundary management) practices points to the constant negotiation adult children must engage in to communicatively deconstruct the family relationship. Overall, this finding illustrates the ways cultural assumptions, in this case the idea that family is nonvoluntary, create significant obstacles to those that want to resist them. It is possible that accomplishing, maintaining, disclosing, and sustaining estrangement might require just as much communicative negotiation as constructing a nontraditional family form. In order to detail the external management practices, I present the findings of my analysis in accordance with my second research question and the thematic analysis method detailed in chapter two. Below I present and interpret these communicative practices before turning to chapter five: discussion of findings.

**Research Question 2a: Disclosing Estrangement**

In order to seek support or keep friends and family apprised of what was going on in their lives, adult children sometimes told their immediate family, extended family, or social network about the distance they were able to accomplish and maintain with their parent or parents. More often, however, participants discussed the numerous reasons why they did not talk about their parent-child estrangement. The section “I did not disclose because …” provides a detailed account of the attributions adult children give for not disclosing their estrangement to their social network. Although not a way that participants disclose their estrangement to members of their social network, this category helps illuminate what stopped participants from making that disclosure and was so salient that exclusion would fail to give the majority of my participants a voice. Thus, the first category provides insight into the reasons why participants opt to withhold disclosing their estrangement to members of their social network. Next, I provide a detailed account
of the ways adult children were able to disclose their estrangement with a parent or parents to their immediate family, extended family, and members of their social network per RQ2a: (1) “They were there,” and (2) “I disclose to my social network.

“I Did Not Disclose Because …”

When asked whether they talked to anyone about the distance they were able to accomplish or maintain, the most pervasive response provided by adult children is illustrated by the category, “I did not disclose because …”. In fact, five attributions coalesced to provide a robust picture of why participants said that they do not tell others about their estrangement: (1) “I thought the information would be a burden to others”, (2) “I perceived the disclosure to be inappropriate”, (3) “I did not think I could”, (4) “I did not have anyone to tell” and (5) “I thought everyone knew”. Understanding the reasons for concealing this information might have real consequences for the adult child’s ability to receive social support.

“I Thought the Information Would Be a Burden to Others”

One reason adult children did not disclose was that they felt like the information would be a burden to others. Research suggests that individuals sometimes reveal information that can be detrimental to a relationship and ultimately become a burden (Afifi, 2003). Petronio and Reierson (2009) describe this as the dilemma of the reluctant confidant. Thus, it appears that adult children who have a negative relationship with a parent or parents were sensitive to this potential dilemma and chose not to disclose for that reason. For example, one participant explains:

CALEB: Uh huh. Sure. I would say I’m 70/30 private versus secret. I don’t go out of my way to bring this sort of things up. For one, it’s nobody’s business. Uh, and for two I don’t want to be that guy that dumps his heart out to everybody who comes along. Driving people to suicide just so I’ll shut up. Um, thinking of the movie Airplane where he’s on the plane where people, one guys dousing himself in gas. Um, I don’t want to be that guy cause that, that’s, I don’t want to annoy people and they don’t care. They’re not going to help me. I don’t want them to help me so it’s not going to accomplish anything. Um, it’s secret, mostly it’s secret with people that I don’t know. Newcomers, um, acquaintances as opposed to friends and even friends of mine, um, very very few people know all of the gory details of the history. And in fact, with the exception of my wife, you
probably know more about the history then some of the other players involved because they have their perspective. I’ve never talked to them about it. Okay? Um, congratulations.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you.

CALEB: Yeah. In that respect, it’s both. It’s a secret and it’s private. (Interview #13)

In this example Caleb talked about multiples reasons that he did not disclose to others about the negative relationship he has with his parents. First, he mentioned that it is nobody’s business, providing some insight into what he means when he says the information is private. Second, he talked about not wanting to “be that guy” who shares the “gory details” of his story, “driving people to suicide just so I’ll shut up.” He claimed that he did not want to annoy people, providing evidence that he did not want to burden others because “they don’t care.” Furthermore, he explained that he does not feel like disclosing that information will provide him with any benefits. He clearly professed that they cannot help him accomplish anything. Third, Caleb discussed how he purposely keeps the information about his estrangement a secret from others. In this regard, Caleb did not want to burden his close friends and also feels like the information is a secret that should be kept from newcomers and acquaintances.

“I Perceived the Disclosure to Be Inappropriate”

Sometimes, participants explained that they did not disclose being they felt it was inappropriate. Typically, this judgment was made based on the potential information recipient’s age. For example, Betty talked about why she did not explicitly disclose the negative relationship she has with her father to her sister:

BETTY: Well I know my sister knows. I imagine I would have told my friends and my mother but I'm sorry I don't remember.

INTERVIEWER: Did you tell your sister?

BETTY: I don't know. I could imagine that I hadn't told her because she's six years younger than me and she experienced the divorce very differently than I did. Um, I felt betrayed and she was like "Daddy is in love with his friend, I get more sisters". It was, I mean, I think our different experiences explain why we don't get along. So I don't think I would have told her. I think she would have been too young for me to talk to her about that. (Interview #2)
Betty explained that she did not think that she told her sister because she was much younger and felt like she experienced her parents’ divorce very differently. Whereas Betty felt betrayed, Betty’s sister experiences the divorce as an opportunity to expand her family. Although experiencing the divorce differently might have been a reason on its own, Betty explicitly articulated that she thought her sister was too young to talk about the estrangement. Another participant provided a similar reason for why he has chosen not to disclose to his daughter:

JON: …and I’ve told my wife here in the past couple years, “You know, it would be a lot easier,” and this sounds really horrible to say, “but, it would be a lot easier if they were just dead. Rather than try to explain, well they’re not good people.” Because how do you explain that to an eight year old. That, well your grandparents aren’t good people, you know. Knowing that she is going to say, “But you are their son.” It’s very um touchy subject and fortunately she doesn’t ask too many questions now but I’m sure as she gets older she is going to start asking a lot of questions and I’ve talked to my wife and we are just going to be very honest and tell her exactly what kind of, uh, actions they did. This is why we don’t have communication. I don’t know how else to go about it. (Interview # 38)

INTERVIEWER: Uh huh.

JON: I know that if I were her I would want to know the truth. Cause my mom kept me from my grandparents, her parents, for twelve years. I had no idea if they were alive or not. (Interview #38)

Similar to Betty, Jon talked about the difficulty he would have talking to his young daughter about the negative relationship he has with his parents. In fact, he said that the disclosure was so difficult that it would have been easier to tell others that his parents were dead. Yet, unlike Betty, Jon discussed how he planned to tell his daughter once she got older and started asking questions. Specifically, he wanted her to know the truth and planned to talk to his daughter about why he does not communicate with his parents. By claiming that he does not know another way to go about it suggests that the thought of the potential disclosure might be distressing. Thus, claiming that the disclosure is inappropriate might simply be a way for participants to avoid talking about the estrangement.

“I Did Not Think I Could”
Sometimes, participants explained that they did not disclose because they lacked the efficacy to do so. In particular, feelings of guilt served as a significant barrier. For example, Sophie described feeling like her unhealthy living situation was somehow her fault:

And I didn't really understand religion at a young age but I always felt guilty that I had done something and for that that's why I was living there and all of these bad things kept on happening and it got to the point where I knew that my situation wasn't a result of anything that I did and that there was no one who was going to be able to take me out of the situation no matter how hard I prayed or whatever and I think it just got to the point where I wasn't even talking to counselors. I think a couple times during that whole initial process, um, I think right after that first one when I was 14 I may offhandedly said, "I want to die". And she notified someone in the school and had me talk to someone but that time I didn't trust any counselors because I was told that anything I said that was disturbing that they would have to tell him because he was my guardian. So I didn't talk to any counselors, um, and at that point my really close group of friends fell apart so I really didn't have anyone else to talk to either. I didn't confide in a lot of people. (Interview #25)

Similar to many children of divorce who might believe that it was their fault their parents got divorced, Sophie explained that she felt guilty for “all of these bad things” that kept on happening to her. Later she came to the realization that the negative relationship she had with her father was not her fault. Next, Sophie discussed how she expressed suicidal ideations and was sent to talk with a counselor in her school. She explained that she did not feel like she was able to talk because it would be immediately reported to her father. In addition, Sophie expressed that she did not feel like she had any peers she could confide in so she did not talk about her negative relationship and the abuse she was experiencing.

In addition to those adult children who lacked efficacy to share their story because they perceive the negative relationship to be their fault, many participants repeatedly suggested that no one else understood what their experience was like, especially those who have positive relationships with their parents. I discussed this with one participant:

INTERVIEWER: Is there anyone you feel like you couldn't talk to?

NADIA: No. No, I mean Josh's parents were very supportive and they didn't judge me or my decision and um, that was it. Josh's mother didn't say oh you
should get back together with your parents or oh you should this or oh you should that. And she was really the only other, and Josh's dad too, but they were really the only other people who knew this had happened. I don't talk about this with people because people who have great relationships with their parents cannot even imagine not having a relationship with their parents. And it's counterproductive to talk about this with people who don't understand it. And people don't understand it. (Interview #17)

Nadia explained that her husband’s parents provided support by not judging her but that they were really the only people who knew about her negative relationship. She explained that she did not tell other people because they did not understand that some children do not have a close or any relationship with their parents. She expressed how counterproductive it can be to explain a (non) relationship to someone who does not get it. In fact, this sentiment was so widely expressed that one participant even told me that sharing the estrangement experience would constitute kin:

INTERVIEWER: So if I said to you that I was estranged from my parents, what would you think about me?

CALEB: What would I think about you? Um, I would say, well then you and I are kin. Let’s go get a beer and talk about it. If, if you were estranged from your parents that would mean that short of you and I being spouses, we arguably could have, you and I could possibly have the strongest human bond possible. Maybe parent child, well that’s the subject of this whole thing, right? Um, I think that that is, that would be, I can’t think of any stronger of a human bond, the ability for two people to enjoy a wonderful, enriching, enlightening human experience. Short of being a spouse, this has to be number two on the list, I can’t think of anything else, can you? I mean maybe we’re both in the Boy Scouts together or something but you know, that’s, to say that we are peas in a pod is an understatement. That’s interesting. I’ve never thought about that. (Interview #13)

After Caleb recounted that no one understands, I asked him what he would think if I were in a similar position to him. His response was that being estranged from my family would make me family to him. He expressed that aside from the relationship with his wife, he could not imagine a bond that was stronger. Thus, to share the estrangement experience is very powerful because it can constitute a new meaning of family.

“I Did Not Have Anyone to Tell”

Unlike participants who lacked the efficacy to disclose, some adult children expressed that there was no one available to tell. Participants giving voice to this
attribution suggested that their own behavior drove others out of their lives. For example, one participant reveals:

INTERVIEWER: Is there a reason you didn't tell any friends?

CONNIE: I didn't have any. By that point I had burned all of my friends. Cause my drinking and drug use was out of control and I had a two year old son and I knew I had to do what was right for him which was get the hell out of there and start over. (Interview #4)

In this example, Connie told me that she did not tell her friends because she simply did not have any friends to tell. In this sense, she perceived that she not only lacks a family but also any kind of social network. Because of her alcohol and drug use, Connie confessed that she “burned all of my friends.” Recognizing this, she physically moved away in order to begin her life again.

“I Thought Everyone Knew”

Finally, the last attribution, “I thought everyone knew”, reflects the participants’ assumption that they did not need to disclose because everyone knew anyway. For example, one participant and I discuss:

INTERVIEWER: Did anyone else know this had happened?

CONNIE: I thought everyone knew and no one was doing anything to help me so, apparently not, I've talked to my sisters since and they didn't know …

She continues:

I didn't know you could [tell anyone] and I thought they [teachers] had already known. I thought the bruises were a dead give away and the welts and you know, and the police were in the office to ask me questions and I couldn't do it, I couldn't tell, and I was like "I don't know" and I don't know why kids do that. I don't know if I was more scared of what was out there beyond her or like I could just handle it. I think I got to the point where I could just buck up and deal with it. You know, it's easier than the unknown because I didn't know what was going to happen if they would take me away.

INTERVIEWER: Did anyone know that this was happening?

CONNIE: I don't know. I got in legal trouble so ... I talked to family members about it later and was like, "Surely you had to know" and they hadn't heard about anything. We don't talk about in my family. We don't talk ... I was concerned people didn't know. Like what the hell. That really concerned me. Like, I can't believe that people can't see, you know? Um, I don't know ... I felt like they [teachers] should have said, what's going on at home? That would have been
more of a direct question. Don't ask what's going on with me, I had no idea what was going on with me. I had, I didn't know how to answer that question. (Interview #4)

Connie explained that she thought her family, teachers, and friends knew about the negative relationship she had with her mother. In retrospect, she reasoned that her family might not have known because they did not talk, and that her teachers did not know because they failed to ask the right questions. Regardless, Connie did not feel the need to disclose because, at the time, she thought that everyone knew. In particular, this attribution reflected situations where adult children perceived their estrangement or at least their negative relationship with their parent or parents to be public. Other participants perceived their estrangement to be private and took measures to keep the negative relationship private or a secret. In both instances, these assumptions might have made it very hard for others to provide social support.

Overall, the category “I did not disclose because …”, suggested that even though participants did not often identify their estrangement as a secret, they also did not want to make the disclosure for a variety of reasons. In fact, if a person was not there or did not ask specifically, it was likely that the participant would never discuss the estrangement with anyone else. This should come as no surprise considering how much participants reported worrying about the reactions from their social network and even in anticipation of a negative response from members of the culture at large.

Disclose Communication Practices

Two categories illustrate the ways social network members come to know about the distance between the adult child and their parent or parents: (1) “They were there,” and (2) “I disclose to my social network.” These practices, as discussed, are not particularly prevalent and in some instances, are not results of the adult child’s desire to disclose. In fact, when social members came to learn about the estrangement, it was often because they are physically present to witness one or multiple “accomplish” or “maintain” communicative practices. Of note, even though many social network
members learned about the estrangement from observation, participants still learned of the distance because the adult child communicated their desire for distance. Thus, the practice “they were there” captures the fact that when adult children publically distanced themselves from their parents they were also communicating that desire to other members, many of whom were immediate family, extended family, and part of the participants’ social network.

“They Were There”

The most salient “disclose” category is: “they were there.” In other words, participants did not have to tell members of their family and social network because they were there to witness the negative relationship and the distancing from the negative relationship. From the adult child’s perspective, they simultaneously communicated their desire for distance to both the parent and their network. For example, Fred narrates:

And so, my wedding day comes and I had invited my mom and my grandparents were going to be considered the grandparents of the groom, uh my grandmother was going to light the mother's candle, grandma helped plan everything and mom just got an invitation and was going to be seated in the third row, or second row with the grandparents, or where otherwise the grandparents would have been. My grandparents were up in the front row. And uh, so at the rehearsal dinner she was just a total spook. Um, she came in with the illusion that she was going to be the mother of the groom. And it was quickly made clear to her that that was not going to be the case. And where it really came to a head was during the ceremony. So during the rehearsal it was planned that I was going to bring in my um, my father's parents, my paternal grandparents, my father and his wife, and my mom and they all were going to be seated in the second row. And that's how we did it in rehearsal. My grandparents in the first row. At the ceremony, it's mom's turn you know, walking her down the aisle and we get her to where she is supposed to be seated next to basically my dad's wife who she had never met in her entirely life, she didn't know her from anyone else. And, she stopped. And she said, “I'm not going to sit in that row with your father.” And I was like oh, “Okay.” So the next row back was all of my aunts and uncles and of course everyone sees that you know mom is turned into this stubborn mule of some sort and the video is actually quite hilarious because every head in the sanctuary just turns and everybody starts whispering to everybody else. Okay, then you will sit in the third row. So the third row was full, so I had to make everyone get up, and so my aunts and uncles all got up and shifted down and my cousins at the end of the row had to go back to the fourth row so she sat in the third row and uh, that was that was it. “I am done with you.” … I haven't never really had any kind of meaningful conversation with her ever again. (Interview #21)
In this excerpt, Fred explained that all of his friends and family bore witness to the moment when he dissolved the relationship with his mother. In fact, Fred talked about how this moment was captured on video when every head turned and everybody started whispering. Thus, the fact that the majority of his friends and family members were present renders disclosure unnecessary.

“I Disclose To My Social Network”

Five communicative practices coalesce to form the category “I disclose to my social network”: (1) “I respond when asked” (2) “I deny their existence”, (3) “I disclose to everyone”, (4) “I show them the correspondence,” and (5) “I narrate as if I’m a third party”. These five practices encompass the different disclosure preferences and practices when adult children do decide to talk about the distance between themselves and their parents.

“I Respond When Asked”

Most typically, participants confessed that they shared their story if they were prompted. In some instances, participants suggested they only responded when asked because it was in the right situation. One participant recalls:

DIANA: Um, I don't outrightly tell people but Riley's family knows but they will still ask me, did you talk to your mom? No. Really. Um, I mean yeah, if people ask. I don't outrightly express it to people. You know what I mean. I mean if it comes up in the right situation I tell people. (Interview #5)

In this example, Diana explained that she was not actively keeping the story of the negative relationship with her parents away from others but also was not ready to just share her story with anyone. This is very similar to another participant who reports:

PATRICK: Not really. I'm pretty open about that. Like I'm not going to volunteer it but if someone asks I'm not really afraid to talk about it. (Interview #52)

Both of the examples suggest that their estrangement story might not necessarily be a secret but one the participants did not feel like openly sharing with others. Not wanting to disclose to others might be a product of the reasons outlined above (e.g., they feel like
the information would be a burden to others) but also because the parent or parents are no longer a salient part of the adult child’s life. In other words, by distancing themselves from their parents, adult children might essentially erase them from their thoughts and daily life to the extent that they do not think of their parent or parents as part of their social network until someone else specifically asks.

In addition, some participants reported that they shared their story when asked in order to help others. For example, an adult child reveals:

SOPHIE: And, I will say honestly that this meeting is very unusual because I don't talk to people unless they ask, unless I can trust them which is why I asked about the confidentiality and I figured that if me talking can in anyway help someone then it's worth it. (Interview #25)

In this excerpt, Sophie confessed that sharing her story required that she trusted the information recipient to keep her story private. Specifically, Sophie alluded to a conversation she had with me prior to our meeting about how I would keep her information confidential. After reassurance, Sophie confessed that she agreed only because she thought her story might help someone else suffering from a negative relationship with a parent or parents. In fact, anecdotally, many participants shared that the reason they came in to discuss their parent-child estrangement was both because the information would be kept confidential and because they wanted others to know that they were not alone.

“I Deny Their Existence”

Adult children often imagined what they would do if they were asked about their parent or parents. This might not be hard to believe considering family relationships often come up in everyday talk. One way participants responded to this anticipatory interaction was to deny the existence of their biological parent by talking about someone else. For example, adult children responded with statements such, “I would tell them about my grandparents” (Interview #12). Another participant details:

DAVE: I would tell you about my stepdad. He is he is literally, and I've told him this all the time, he is literally more of a dad to me than my dad ever was. I can
remember all kinds of stuff from my childhood you know, um, I mean he's given me those talks, he's done all of those fatherly things. And uh, and I've told him this, he's he's my dad.

In this example, Dave did not acknowledge his biological father because he felt like his stepdad performed all of the things he imagined a dad would do (e.g., given talks).

Specifically, Dave did not define family structurally, but arguably adopted a more functional/transactional definition. By talking about his stepfather as his father, Dave effectively resisted the idea that families are both biological and nonvoluntary.

In concert with the communicative practice of treating the parent as a stranger/acquaintance/non-family member, some participants also described telling others that they did not have a parent. For example, one adult child relays:

BETTY: You know, if I went on a date with someone tomorrow and someone said, tell me about your parents, I think I would say, "I don't really have a dad". And I don't know how I'd follow that up, but I don't know. It's like a non-issue now. (Interview #2)

Betty explained how she would tell a date that she did not have a dad if it were to come up. Perhaps most interesting, she then described how she would not know what to say after this. Her loss of potential words suggested that we do not have a vocabulary for being without a family. Ultimately, this example illustrates the way that the discourses of genetics and family as a nonvoluntary relationship are so deeply embedded in American culture. This excerpt also illuminates the struggle many estranged adult children might have in disclosing their experience to others.

“I Disclose to Everyone”

In stark contrast to the majority of individuals who chose not to discuss the estrangement, some adult children were very forthcoming. In fact, when asked whether anyone knew what was going on or whether they discussed distancing themselves from their parents with members of their social network, some participants responded that they simply tell anyone who will listen. For example, I discussed with one adult child:

INTERVIEWER: Did anyone else know this had happened?
EVA: My mom, my brothers. I’m just one of those who will talk to pretty much anybody so anybody who you knows me knows about the struggles I have with my dad. Not just my dad but my family in general. The dynamic of my family. Yeah. I talked to a lot of people about it … I know I've discussed that with the girls I work with and I've talked about it with my best friend, I don't talk to her much anymore, I know I've discussed that. And I talked about it with my nieces and nephews. I try to describe to them him as a dad, and what that was like so that they can understand it and their own interactions with their fathers because their fathers are, my brothers act just like my dad, so maybe they can learn some coping skills, not that my coping skills are great but so they know they can talk to me about it. (Interview #6)

In this example, Eva conveyed that she shared her experience with her immediate family, extended family, and members of her social network, such as her coworkers.

Furthermore, Eva explained that she shared her story of her estranged relationship with her father as a way to help her nieces and nephews better understand their relationships with their own fathers. Unlike many of my other participants, Eva did not behave as though she wanted to keep this information private or a secret. In particular, Eva did not suggest she felt the same cultural pressure described by some of my other participants. One reason might be the fact that Eva, although she still identified herself as estranged, located herself lower on the continuum, considering she still regularly communicated with her father. In this regard, Eva might not feel like she had to justify her distancing practices. This finding suggests that one’s disclosure preferences and behaviors might be related to where each participant locates him or herself on the estrangement continuum.

“I Show Them Correspondence”

The practice, “I show them the correspondence,” emerged when adult children engaged in written correspondence with their parent about the negative relationship. By sharing the correspondence, members of the social network were able to see for themselves the negative relationships in action. For example, one participant describes:

JANEY: Yes, my grandma and grandpa did and I showed them the e-mail I sent to Sarah [mother] and I showed them the email that Sarah sent back to me. Um, and they both just shook their head and said she still has not changed. The lies, more and more lies. Yup, and this is why there is no contact. (Interview #12)

In this excerpt, Janey let her grandparents read the correspondence between her and her mother. She ultimately let her grandparents draw their own conclusions and reiterated
that the content of the letter served as another reason she no longer has contact with her mother.

“I Narrate As If I Am a Third Party”

Finally, some participants found it easier to talk about their estrangement experience to others by telling their story as if they are a third-person narrator. Although not particularly salient in the data, this practice suggests that adult children might not only want to distance themselves from their parent or parents but also from the distancing experience in general. For example,

INTERVIEWER: Does this ever come up with your friends or your other family?

ALLISON: Sometimes, my kids, especially the youngest, will ask about their lineage. And I have a logical discussion with her and she knows the readers digest version of what happened. Um, and I just distance myself when I tell her the story. She knows my parents names, she knows my grandparents names, she knows I was born and raised in another state, um, ...

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean when you say you distance yourself?

ALLISON: I tell it like I'm telling it from someone else's point of view. (Interview #1)

Allison discussed the way she talks about her relationship with her parents from someone else’s point of view. By doing so, Allison argued that she was able to distance herself from the negative experience she has with her parents.

Overall, adult children spent the majority of the time explaining why they did not want to disclose their estrangement to members of their social network. If important others were cognizant of the distant relationships, the majority of the social network members knew because they were physically present to witness a distancing behavior. Otherwise, participants discussed only sharing the information if they were prompted, although some adult children are more forthcoming about their estrangement experience. These results suggest that those suffering from any negative aspect of the estrangement process might not be receiving any support for this distressing life event simply because it appears that no one knows that it is happening.
Research Question 2b: Sustaining Estrangement

In response to the estrangement disclosure or knowledge of the estrangement, social network members were typically either supportive or unsupportive. In this data set, participants did not describe their network members’ reactions as ambivalent. The following section details social network members’ both supportive and unsupportive reactions. This “reactions” section provides context for the eight communicative practices that depict the ways adult children were able to sustain or justify their estrangement with a parent to their immediate family, extended family, and social network. In concert with the organization in chapter three, themes and practices are detailed in order of those most prevalent to least prevalent.

Reactions

As alluded to above, social network members were either very supportive or very unsupportive of the estrangement between the adult children and their parent or parents. Across the board, the relationship between the adult children and their social network member did not seem to dictate the social network members’ reaction. Thus, parents, extended family, friends and coworkers might be supportive or not. Perhaps surprisingly, social network members did not express simultaneous support and discouragement (i.e., ambivalence). This finding suggests that estrangement might be a very polarizing family disruption, where individuals who know about the estrangement might feel like they have to choose sides. In fact, almost all of my 52 participants mentioned that they felt like at least one person in their network chose either their side or their parent or parents’ side. The following supportive and unsupportive responses are detailed below to help put the finding of RQ2b into context.

Supportive

Participants who felt supported described social network members who were perceived as both sympathetic and non-judgmental. In fact, participants commented often that they had expected a negative reaction and were relieved when they were
supported. This finding suggests that adult children anticipate that their disclosure is going to be met with criticism. Put simply, they anticipated they would be stigmatized (see Goffman, 1963) for estranging themselves from their parent or parents. For example, Iliana explains:

ILIANA: I guess. I guess it's, I think it's partially that I don't wish to be negatively judged for something that I feel they're they're misinformed about and I think partially I just don't want to have an argument about it. Because I don't want to have to prove to someone that I'm not a bad person. And if I have to prove that things are as bad as I say they are then I have to bring up a lot of things that are not pleasant. Um, and that's just not something I want to spend my time doing. Is either of those things. So I guess I worry that they would try and argue with me. (Interview #11)

Iliana conveyed the difficulty and fears she had about disclosing her negative relationship with her mother. She suggested that people who heard about their distance would negatively judge her and that she would have to convince others that she was not a bad person. Thus, participants often described that they felt supported when members of their social network did not evaluate them negatively. One participant describes how her husband has been supportive:

MANDY: He has been absolutely supportive of whatever I need to do for myself and my family. And he’s, he has um, he’s just been entirely supportive. He hasn’t judged my actions or you know, said oh, you know, you need to be nicer to mom or anything. Um, and I know that he has is own ways of distancing himself from them but, uh, yeah. He’s he’s been very supportive. (Interview #16)

Mandy clearly established that her husband was supportive and offered the example that he does not judged her actions or tells her that she needs to have a relationship with her mother. This example, then, suggests that Mandy not only would expect the average person to evaluate her negatively but also people who know her story such as her husband. Another participant talks about disclosing his estrangement with his father to his college friends:

BRAXTON: Um, some of them were surprised because none of them had ever seen that level of conflict between one of their friends and one of their parents. Cause most of the time people really try to keep that under wraps I think, or if they do have that kind of a relationship but I've always been an open book. I like talking about my feelings, especially with people that I'm close with. So, I think
that there was a lot of understanding, a lot of empathy, a lot of, yeah. (Interview #7)

In this example, Braxton noted that most of the time people try to “keep that [conflict and the negative relationship] under wraps”, suggesting that others might view conflict and distance between parents and children negatively. Again, Braxton’s account suggested that individuals were very conscious that disclosing their estrangement might be met with negative responses. Yet, he revealed that his friends were very understanding and empathetic because he was able to share his experience and feelings.

Participants also discussed the importance of social network presence. In other words, adult children described feeling supported when they know that someone was there for them. Janey discusses with me how her extended family and friends provide her support:

INTERVIEWER: Did you ask for support?

JANEY: I did not. I'm very supportive grandparents and friends and my close family.

INTERVIEWER: How did they support you?

JANEY: Just being there and listening to me. Um, at first it was hard I did cry a lot. You know, that's your mom. You want that perfect family and to just be away from that, so my grandma gave me a lot of hugs and when I'm upset she rubs my head. We had a lot of my head in her lap and her rubbing my hair nights. But, ...

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel like you got the support you needed?

JANEY: Yes, I do. (Interview #12)

Janey suggested that just knowing her family and friends are “there” was very supportive. They were able to listen to her and let her cry. This echoes the sentiment of another participant who further describes:

LILY: They just let me cry a lot. I spent a lot of time talking and crying and they didn't even have to respond, they just had to listen. I didn't even care if they had good things to say. It didn't matter, I could just sit there in silence so long as I got everything out. It didn't matter to me.
Lily, like Janey, wanted someone to listen to her and to be physically and socially present. Specifically, Lily revealed that she did not need traditional social support such as verbal comfort, reappraisal, or esteem support. Instead, she suggested that she just needs someone to listen to her story; to let her get everything out.

Taken together, of the participants who felt able to disclose their estrangement, many were met with support. This support, however, typically looked different from the traditional types of social support presented in the social support literature (see Burleson, 2003; Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Goldsmith, 2004). Thus, social presence might be a new type of social support particularly salient to individuals who anticipate they will be stigmatized for their disclosure.

**Unsupportive**

Although some participants felt like they are supported, many participants also talked about how their family and friends had a very difficult time understanding the estrangement. This might come as no surprise considering that adult children often expressed that they did not want to disclose their estrangement with a parent or parents for fear of negative evaluation. For example, unlike Mandy who had a supportive spouse, another participant relates:

GREG: Um, at that point yeah. And again, it goes back to my opening remark, um, it take a and my wife doesn't understand, you are always there for your parents, you live by the third commandment, you honor and obey them and trust them and they are always there for you. And I feel like I have been but at times I can very easily shut them out of my life. (Interview #22)

Greg explained that his wife could not understand the negative relationship he had with his mother. Specifically, Greg’s wife cited their shared religious beliefs to try and convince him that his behavior was unacceptable. Another participant described how her father was unable to support her estrangement with her mother:

INTERVIEWER: Did anyone else know this was happening?

DEVINA My father knew, um and I told my current partner, Bill, about it and he has been very supportive about it. Um, my father has been a mess. Um, and now she still lives there and I don’t know what’s happening with him and if, I wasn’t
sure how to fill out the questionnaire because I have been distancing myself from my dad as well but not intentionally.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

DEVINA So…

INTERVIEWER: You feel like you are distancing yourself from him because of her?

DEVINA Kind of because he won’t let me heal and he always says I’m not doing it right and you need to talk to her and he doesn’t support my decision on it whatsoever.

Devina conveyed that her negative relationship with her mother influenced her relationship with her father. She recounted that although her partner Bill was supportive, her father was a mess. Devina claimed that he would not let her heal and tried to intervene. Specifically, he did not support her decision to distance herself from her mother. Ultimately, this example depicts the way that a negative relationship with one parent might facilitate a negative relationship with the other. In fact, one of the most salient sustain practices is “I became estranged from other family members”.

Thus, understanding the range of family reactions helps illuminate the practices, some of which the culture might judge to be extreme, adult children enact to sustain the distance they are able to create between themselves and their parents with their social network. Specifically, the data suggests a positive relationship between unsupportive reactions and the energy the adult child have to expend on estrangement sustainment. Next, I present the ways adult children sustain the estrangement with their social network in detail.

Sustain Communicative Practices

Eight communicative practices characterize the ways adult children justify their estrangement with their parent or parents to their social network: (1) “I respond to reconciliation attempts,” (2) “I do not bring it up,” (3) “I became estranged from other family members,” (4) “I asked others to stop communicating with the parent,” (5) “I asked other to stop talking about the parent,” (6) “I carefully negotiated family
functions,” (7) “I asked to meet with them separately,” and (8) “I did not sustain the distance because of third party interference.” These practices illustrate the network consequences of becoming estranged from a parent or parents. Overall, these communicative practices reflect the adult children’s reactions to either supportive or unsupportive responses from members of their social network.

“I Respond to Reconciliation Attempts”

Two practices coalesced to form the category, I respond to reconciliation attempts: (1) “I refuse their attempts” and (2) “I evade their attempts”. Participants who gave voice to these communicative practices described someone from their social network putting pressure on them to reconcile with the parent or parent from whom the adult children is estranged. In fact, many participants conveyed that they did not feel like they would ever be able to reconcile with their parent and other participants make it clear that if a reconciliation were ever possible, it would require significant work on their parent or parents’ behalf. Thus, in order to sustain the distance, it might come as no surprise that the following examples depict adult children who actively refused and/or tried to evade third party attempts at reconciliation.

“I Refuse Their Attempts”

More prevalent of the two practices, adult children typically described outright refusing to reconcile. Often, immediate family members would attempt to try and piece their family back together despite the desire of the adult child to maintain the distance they were able to accomplish. For example, I discuss with one participant:

INTERVIEWER: When, if at all, does the relationship with your dad come up?

GEORGIA When I talk to my mom, when she comes to visit me. That's pretty much when it comes up.

INTERVIEWER: How do you negotiate that?

GEORGIA Generally she pushes me to reach out to him and she blames me for a lot of the things that happened. She's in a tough situation. She can't blame him, cause he can't accept that he's wrong. He's never apologized for a thing in his life. He's never accepted even the small stuff. If a dish breaks, it's because the dish
was faulty not because he dropped it. Um, so that's kind of tough when she wants to talk about it. And it's strange when, you know my husband, he comes from a close family also and he really wants to have that extended network and make things right. He really want to have a relationship with my family. He's a developed a good relationship with my mom over the last couple of years and they've over come that but but he still doesn't understand, he wants to make it better, but it's not, it's not like trying to make it between with a rational sane adult. You just can't cross back over those lines, there's no forgiveness. (Interview #9)

Georgia described the way her mother attempted to force her to reach out to her father.

Yet, she did not blame her mother and refocused her distaste to explain that her father could never admit that he was wrong so her mother ended up blaming her. Specifically, Georgia provided an example of a fundamental bias individuals often illustrated when making attributions. Sillars (1980) contends that individuals generally view themselves as competent and not responsible for negative events. Alternatively, we tend to view our partners as personally responsible for negative events. This combination often escalates in unhealthy ways.

Furthermore, Georgia also described feeling pressure from her husband, who she described as coming from a close family. She explained that he “wants to make it right” and have a relationship with her family. Specifically, Georgia revealed that despite her husband’s desire to reunite the family, she could not forgive her father because he had crossed a line that could not be crossed back. Thus, she refused both her mother and her husband’s attempt at reconciliation.

Sometimes, participants also found that members of their extended family tried to take on the responsibility of reuniting the parent-child dyad. Another participant narrates:

MAX: Sometimes here and there… but I see sometimes one of my uncles tries to put less distance between my mom and I because he’ll be like, “Oh, your mom needs a ride out, I’ll pay for the gas to go to [city], [state]… you could come with, or if you could drive your mom that'd be great!” And I’m like, “I can’t really endure a two and a half hour car ride with her, I’d really prefer not to” (Interview #47)
Max described how his uncle attempted to reconcile him with his mother by putting them in physical proximity. Max, however, did not want to do this and declined, thwarting his uncle’s attempt. Another participant June relates:

> I feel like I have a hard time talking to my paternal grandmother because I don't really feel like she is on my side and now that I really think about it she was always saying like you and your mom will have a relationship one day and that you'll get over it and one day it will all be okay and your dad will bounce back and there is so much optimism and it almost angers me because she doesn't, she isn't hearing me or she lives in a fantasy world where everyone's friends. That's the only one that really frustrates me. (Interview #46)

June shared that her grandmother was not on her side and suggested that the relationship would be better one day. This angers June because she felt like she was not being heard and that her grandmother was delusional with regards to the situation with her son. June described reconciliation as a “fantasy world where everyone’s friends,” indicating how very unlikely it would be to reconcile.

Finally, sometimes, social network members realized they were never going to reconcile after a failed attempt. In the following example, Nadia describes a failed attempt at a reconciliation that helped her realize that she was better off without her parents and that a reconciliation was not necessary or going to ever happen. She recounts:

> NADIA: Um, well, first of all I told her that I wasn't really interested in a reconciliation. Because I didn't think it would happen. Um, she wanted to try. Her first comment back to me was that the folks just don't seem like they are able to talk about this. Well yeah. If they had been able to talk about it 25 years ago we would have been able to iron it out. Um, and then she tried to put together a meeting with my mother where my mother could have said something but my sister brought her daughter with her that day and we ended up meeting at [mall] at Panera. And I almost think my sister wanted to sabotage it by bringing her daughter along because with her daughter there was going to be no true communication. I wasn't going to talk about it in front of my niece that I barely know. In fact don't even know. And Maggie, my sister's name is Maggie, and Maggie was so adamant that none of this stuff be shared with her children that maybe she would share it with them when they were older and Lucy was already in college so I don't think she was all that fragile that she couldn't understand what was going on, I don't understand why my sister was trying to protect her daughter from this very ugly family thing, it is what it is. And, Maggie basically wanted me to just coming to family things and mixing in with my parents for the sake of family life. Family life isn't rich if there are tension like that and you hear so many people talk about how they hate the holidays cause they have to go to so-and-so's house who they hate. So on and so forth. And to me I'm thinking I have family life with my daughter, with my husband, with his two sons, I don't need to
just make nice to have family life and I don't understand why people are willing to accept really bad relationships where something is better than nothing because to me, that's just absolutely a falsehood. Something is not better than nothing, a healthy realization of where your life is and to make your own life is far better than accepting something so negative. As you’re not capable of having something else or the world will come to an end or whatever, because it doesn't. Your life is what you make of it. And with that being said, it took about 20 years to get there. So, it didn't happen over night. (Interview #17)

Nadia described the way her sister tried to mend the relationship with their mother for “the sake of family life”. Yet Nadia came to realize that family life was not rich unless the people involved in the family cared about each other. She described how she had constructed a new family with her husband, stepsons, and her biological daughter. She commented that she did not need to accept a bad relationship just because it was “something”. As she argues, “something is not better than nothing” when it is negative. Thus, Nadia realized for herself that not being in a relationship with her parents was not the end of the world. This passage illustrates a woman who is able to shake off the cultural assumption that family is nonvoluntary. She alluded to a constitutive approach to defining family when she talks about family being what you make of it. By refusing to reconcile and constructing a new family, Nadia effectively reinforced the distance between her and her parents.

“I Evade Their Attempts”

Sometimes, participants did not refuse reconciliation attempts as much as they avoided them. In these instances, participants often lied to evade the conversation. One participant and I discussed:

INTERVIEWER: What do you say to the people who try to get you to reconcile?

ILIANA: Um, it hasn't happened in a long time. Some of the times when it happened it was when we were not talking but hadn't decided not to talk place. We would see each other cordially on specific occasions. Generally it's from people who I don't see very often and I just nod. Um, I don't do a lot of fighting over it. I'm not going to see them again. Um, they are not going to keep pushing if I just say I'll try.

INTERVIEWER: With no intention of ...

ILIANA: No. And some of it was like, recently I found a two-year-old message on Facebook from a cousin who had said something about how maybe I should
try again. I'm certain that I saw it when she sent it. It was unopened but I could see the first couple of lines. And I think I just never opened it and I was like oh my God! And it kind of made me feel bad again … Um, so that I just didn't respond to. I just didn't open the message. I'm not going to deal with that, it's not their decision to make for me. (Interview #11)

Iliana described two ways she evaded her family’s attempt at reconciliation. First, she attempted to deceive her family by telling them that she would try without any intention of doing so. Then she also explained how she avoided an attempt by simply never opening or responding to a Facebook message requesting that she try and reconcile with her mother. By lying to and ignoring her family, Iliana was able to effectively maintain the estrangement between herself and her mother and sustain it with her social network.

“I Do Not Bring it Up”

The communicative practice, “I do not bring it up,” depicts participants who sustained the estrangement by never talking about it. This might come as no surprise considering how many participants simply never told anyone about it at all. Of note, this communicative practice is different from individuals who never told anyone about the distance at all. Although similar, this constitutes a sustain practice (instead of a disclosure) because the adult children’s social network members already knew about the distance. Thus, this practice was typically for those participants who decided to share the information once and never speak about it again. Specifically, participants often claimed they did not bring it up because no one understood their experience or situation. For example, one adult child explains:

NADIA: I don't talk about this with people because people who have great relationships with their parents cannot even imagine not having a relationship with their parents. And it's counter-productive to talk about this with people who don't understand it. And people don't understand it. (Interview #17)

In this example, Nadia perceived that individuals with good relationships with their parents could and did not understand what it was like to be estranged from a parent. Thus, she simply chose not to tell these individuals. Finally, another adult child explained that she avoided talking about the distance because she perceived that it would be hurtful to the information recipient. She recounts:
BETTY: Um, I don't really want to tell my grandma about it cause, I don't know what it's like to have a kid that's like that. Like, I don't know how hard it must be to have a son that acts the way he does and to be like, I'm the one who raised him. I don't know what that's like for her. But, at the same time, I can't pretend, for her benefit, to pretend to like him. So when she asks me about him or asks me about my sister, people, family members from whom I am estranged, I kind of dodge the question and then I switch subjects. (Interview #2)

In order to avoid causing hurt to her grandmother, Betty reported that she avoided talking about the negative relationship she has with her father. Overall, participants made different attributions for why they did not want to talk about the estrangement, but nevertheless, they manage social network members by simply not talking about it.

“I Became Estranged from Other Family Members”

One of the most prevalent reactions to not being supported by their family was for adult children to become estranged from those people who did not support them, most often other members of their family. For example, one participant discusses:

KAYLA: They knew that, they first knew that I wasn’t talking to my dad cause the Greek side called them, the Spanish side. And uh, once they heard that oh she’s not calling, things like that they would call me or my mom and ask, oh are you calling? Why are they calling us? You know, kind of frustrating with that whole thing and I said I’m not because this is not, you know, I’m not interested and my mom would really be like hitting the point like, don’t bother, don’t answer their calls if they bother you or don’t worry about what’s going on over here kind of thing. So, they really found out through the other side of the family first and then it was reiterated by me saying that I wasn’t, um, having any contact or communication with them, so. (Interview #14)

Kayla revealed that she could no longer communicate with her dad’s family as a result of her extended family repeatedly contacting her about her father. She explained that her extended family started to understand when the other side of her family explained. She followed-up by directly telling them that she was no longer going to have any contact or communication with them. Another participant described that distance with her mother also cost him the relationship with his father:

EZRA: Yeah, I guess, like when it got to a point kind of like my wife and I got to this point where we don't know what to do, we tried talking to their siblings, I tried talking to dad directly, I think mom has a problem, but it's just gotten to the point now where when I talk to my dad, if I were ever to talk to my dad it's like either help me fix this problem or don't talk to me. It's kind of one or the other. For me there's no more talking friendly, so yeah. (Interview #19)
Ezra related that he tried to discuss the relationship with his mother with her siblings and his father. Yet, Ezra found that talking to his dad was unproductive and essentially suggested that if he was not a part of the solution then he was a part of the problem. Thus, because his dad refused to help, Ezra expressed that he no longer wanted to communicate with his father as well. Unlike the first communicative practice, which depicts adult children trying to alienate the estranged parent from the rest of the social network, this communicative practice illustrates the adult child removing themselves from the rest of the family. This finding suggests that deconstructing family can be either a network or individual act.

“I Asked Others to Stop Talking About the Parent”

The communicative practice, “I asked them to stop talking about the parent”, was given voice by participants who did not want to hear updates about the parent with whom they had a negative relationship. Devina explained, “Um, I’ve told my dad very straightforward that I don’t want updates about her. I don’t really want to know what’s happening in her life” (Interview #37). Clearly, Devina wanted to maintain distance with her mom by living her life as if her mother was not a part of it. She did not want to hear updates and have a constant reminder of their estranged relationship. Janey echoes her sentiment:

Yes she does. She talks to her, I'm sure she talks to her daily. She tries to tell me stuff about Sarah [parent] and I tell her that I don't want to know. I don't care. If you want to tell someone about it, you have your friends. I don't care. And she's done a very good job of not telling me about Sarah anymore. (Interview #12)

Janey told her sister that she did not care about Sarah’s life and to please stop sharing details. She conveyed that there were other people she could turn to, in effect, trying to eliminate herself as a confident that involved stories about her mother. Janey explained that her sister was able to respect her wishes and stopped talking about Sarah. Overall, participants who described this communicative practice not only wanted to help maintain distance but also wanted to communicate to their social network or family member the
estranged relationship has not changed. Thus, this communicative practice does both maintenance and sustainment work.

“I Asked Others To Stop Communicating with the Parent”

One of the most potentially costly communicative practices was when adult children asked other members of their social network to stop communicating with their parent or parents. For example, participants asked members of their social network to stop communicating with their parent because they saw it as a way for that social network member to hurt them. A participant explains:

FAITH: No. no. I have asked my ex-husband to please not communicate with my mother. Because I think he does that as kind of a passive aggressive move. Because, uh, you know I've said, would you quit calling my family members. That I've asked because I think he likes to keep embers kind of alive out there. I've asked him not to do that but that's all. (Interview #8)

Faith asked her ex-husband to stop talking to her mother because she perceived he was doing it to punish her in some way. Furthermore, this communication kept the relationship alive, which appeared to be something that Faith did not want. Thus, in order to sustain the estrangement, Faith felt compelled to make the request. Overall, this communicative practice illustrates the way adult children attempted to alienate their parent or parents (with whom they had a negative relationship) from other important members of their social network to help sustain the estrangement.

“I Carefully Negotiated Family Functions”

The communicative practice, “I carefully negotiated family functions”, emphasizes the way adult children communicated with their families in order to address the estranged relationship. In particular, one participant explains:

FRED: Yes, I do. And in fact, so, with my mom, she's up there in the [city] with my grandparents and uh, my aunt and my uncle and basically the core of my family. And so when I go up to visit my grandparents they try and get everyone together and they always ask, is it okay if we invite your mom? You know. Or, if I am planning on going to something they let me know my mom is going to be there. So they let me you know, uh, control the valve on that. (Interview #21)
This example suggests that participants were able to negotiate their family functions with the help of their extended family. In this case, Fred’s family let him decide whether his mother would be invited to a family function and let him decide whether he would like to attend a function in which his mother was in attendance. Thus, sustaining estrangement was not a difficult task because the family supported the adult child’s desire for distance. Unlike the communicative practice, third party intervention detailed below, this communicative practice suggests that family support and negotiation might be important to maintaining a healthy family system.

“I Asked to Meet With Them Separately”

One way adult children tried to negotiate their estrangement with their parent or parents was to ask other members of their network to interact with them separately from the rest of their family. This appears to be an attempt by the participant to retain certain family relationships and maintain distance with the estranged parent. One participant narrates:

EVA: So my mom's basic reaction was so now I'm going to be punished. It's not fair to me that I don't get to see you. And I was like if you want to see me we can make special arrangements because she was very upset with me. (Interview #6)

Eva contended that her mother was unhappy that she had distanced herself from her father and felt like Eva is punishing her. Eva’s response was to offer to make special arrangements because she was unwilling to spend time with her mother if that meant spending time with her father. Another participant described that because of her negative relationship with her father, her mother had to visit this participant separately:

GEORGIA: Like I said, I'm very close with my mom. We talk all the time. You know, sometimes twice a day. And that's good. She and I have come to a healthy place. When I talk to my mom, when she comes to visit me.

Georgia elucidated that she still could have a close relationship with her mom despite the fact that she desired distance from her father. She alluded to the fact that unlike with her dad, she had come to a healthy place with her mom. Thus, sustaining estrangement required that she talk to her mom and interact with her mom separately from her father.
As it happens, the majority of those participants who gave voice to this practice suggest that meeting separately yielded positive results.

“I Did Not Have To Sustain the Distance Because of Third Party Interference”

Perhaps one of the most unexpected categories that emerged was when third parties rendered sustaining the estrangement irrelevant. Specifically, social network members worked in a variety of ways to isolate the adult children from the rest of the family. For example one participant and I discussed:

INTERVIEWER: Throughout these chapters basically no one knew what was going on?

CONNIE: Not that I know of. My sister, told me a couple years ago that I was really an island, nobody knew what was going on and my cousin said that's because your mom told us all you were dead. So she told everybody that I was dead and so everyone was thinking that I wasn't even alive. So. And my siblings are a generation older than me so they were gone. They were there, so you know what I mean, they had their own families and it wasn't for lack of like, it was just because they didn't know.

INTERVIEWER: So your mom told your cousin and your ...

CONNIE: Well, she said that she told everyone that I was dead. And that was the year I moved to [state]. (Interview #4)

Connie explained that she never had to discuss the estrangement with her immediate and extended families because her mother told them she had died. By interfering in this way, Connie did not have to answer any questions about the distance. Alternatively, she also did not receive any support from her family. In other instances, social network members simply cut the adult child out of their lives. Caleb recounts:

CALEB: Um, I was invited to a small handful of first birthday parties, first communions, those sorts of things. After a while, the other people involved didn’t want to have to deal with the tension in the room anymore so they stopped inviting me. That was their response, was to stop inviting me. Um.

INTERVIEWER: What was it like when you were at these functions?

CALEB: Uh, it was, it was tough. It was somewhat unnerving to me. It wasn’t so overwhelming that, that I felt incapacitated in any way. I kept my distance from them. They kept their distance from me. They didn’t say anything to me. I didn’t say anything to them. I was fine with that. I’m not saying it was easy or pleasant but I was fine with it. Apparently it wasn’t fine with everyone else.
INTERVIEWER: Um, what happened next?

CALEB: Um, let me think. What would be a good, a good chapter header? A good stopping and then restarting point? Um, probably the big one, the biggest one was five years ago when my child was born. Um, that’s when I stopped getting invited to things. Um, my mother told my sister and then my sister told me, um, point blank that if I am invited to family functions that she’s not going to go. She’s not going to meet my child. She doesn’t want to see my child because she wouldn’t be able to handle it and that’s verbatim. Um, in that respect, that was basically, um, that’s the most explicit action that I’ve ever seen them portray towards me of, uh, um, what’s the word I’m looking for here? What another word for mutual? Their attitude, my attitude towards them is identical to their attitude towards me. The feeling is mutual? You know that’s an old cliché? (Interview #13)

Caleb described that at first he would attend family functions but it was extremely uncomfortable so his family stopped inviting him. He remembered that this was particularly true after his son was born. He was told that his mother could not handle meeting his son. This might imply that his family chooses to honor his mother’s desire at the expense of Caleb. Yet, he then described keeping his distance from the rest of his family just as they kept their distance from him. Unlike other adult children who had the support of their families and subsequently excluded the parent, Caleb’s family chose to exclude him, marking what he described as a bilateral family dissolution.

**Summary of RQ2 Findings**

In sum, adult children employed multiple communicative practices to disclose and sustain their distanced relationship from their parent or parents to members of their immediate family, extended family, and social network. Two communicative practices emerged as the ways adult children disclose their estrangement to others. This reported finding, however, might be misleading because the majority of participants did not disclose their estrangement at all. As discussed, both important others and the anticipation of negative cultural evaluation influenced participants’ ability and/or motivation to share their experience with others.

Given the cultural perception that family relationships are nonvoluntary but also the cultural understanding that individuals should leave abusive relationships, it might come as no surprise that family members were either very supportive or unsupportive
after learning about the distance. In light of these various reactions, participants identified eight communicative practices they enact to sustain the estrangement to their social network. Similar to the findings presented in chapter three, adult children reported spending much more effort sustaining the estrangement than actually disclosing it to their family, friends, and co-workers. Taken together, these two findings (i.e., the prevalence of maintenance and sustainment) illustrate how dissolving family relationships are a different communicative undertaking than the dissolution of friendships and romantic partners. These conclusions and others will now be interpreted more extensively in the fifth and final chapter: discussion of findings.
CHAPTER FIVE:
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Introduction

Results from the analyses detailed in chapters three and four clearly exemplify the numerous and seemingly complex ways adult children accomplished and managed distance with a parent or parents, and subsequently, how those adult children presented and sustained that distance with their parent or parents to members of their social network. In this final chapter, I present these findings and implications of these findings globally, illustrating the ways the results meet the broad purposes of the study. The presentation of the findings includes an overview of results, theoretical implications, broader knowledge contributions, practical implications, limitations of the study, and finally, directions for future research. Overall, this research has the potential to serve as a foundation for the understanding and study of family estrangement, especially between adult children and their parent or parents. The findings from this study not only hold particular promise for communication researchers, but also might prove worthwhile for related fields such as family studies, psychology, sociology, social work, and counseling.

Overview of Results

Given the dearth of research surrounding family estrangement and parent-child estrangement in particular, the present study’s research questions asked about the communicative practices adult children enact to accomplish and maintain distance from a parent or parents as well as the communicative practices they employ to disclose and justify that distance to members of their immediate family, extended family, and social network. Taken together, the findings from this study not only illuminate these communicative practices but also allude to the broader theoretical and practical implications of enacting these practices.

Adult children expressed multiple pathways to locating themselves on the estrangement continuum (see Figure 1). At a broad level, these practices were
declarative, one-time, and/or continuously enacted. Declarative practices, although not enacted by all participants, depict very direct ways for adult children to move themselves towards greater distance. In some regards, participants who enacted declarative practices might more closely resemble the dissolution process associated with other types of relationships (e.g., romantic partner dissolution), in the sense that romantic couples typically discuss their dissolution (Battaglia, Richard, Datteri, & Lord, 1998). Alternatively, some participants enacted both one-time and continuous communicative practices to accomplish and maintain distance simultaneously. One-time practices, such as moving away, were only enacted one-time because of the nature of the practice, whereas continuous practices, such as not attending family gatherings, were those adult children had to repeatedly employ. In particular, the emphasis adult children put on continuous practices has interesting implications for the understanding of estrangement.

As argued in chapter one, estrangement is not merely a static state but rather a dynamic process by which individuals potentially move along a continuum over the course of their lifetimes. This movement is particularly evident in the prevalence of the continuous practices adult children identified as essential to the estrangement process. In fact, the enactment of continuous practices was the only constant experience of all 52 participants. It is important to note that because continuous practices were on-going, the salience and prevalence of these continuous communicative practices illustrate the importance of distance maintenance. Put differently, adult children expressed a greater need to engage in communicative practices that kept their parent from re-entering their lives than any other type of practice.

As it happens, parents were not the only individuals who (sometimes) sought to reconcile with their child. Members of the adult children’s social network also went to great lengths to attempt a “family healing.” Most often, these attempts at reconciliation were met with annoyance in the best situations and hostility in worst-case scenarios. Thus, it might come as no surprise that adult children reported being reluctant to share the
distancing of their negative relationship with others, regardless of the network members’ relationship to the adult children. In fact, participants were often so worried that others would evaluate them negatively they expressed surprise and relief when someone in their family or friend network did not evaluate them negatively.

Consequently, adult children, in response to the second research question, offered numerous attributions for why they chose not to disclose their distanced relationship to anyone. Of those who did know about the negative relationship, the majority came to know because they were physically present to witness one or more of the accomplish/maintain communicative practices. Alternatively, those adult children who did share the experience of their distanced relationship often expressed only telling others on a conditional basis.

Similar to the effort expended in maintaining the distance with the parent or parents, adult children also reported having to actively justify or sustain the distance. Participants discussing the sustainment practices emphasized the importance of doing so, often citing taking arguably extreme measures (e.g., getting estranged from the rest of the family) to thwart parental interaction. Taken together, it appears that findings from the present study shed light on the process of estrangement that might be essential to studying the phenomenon. Next, the discussion of findings turns to detailing the theoretical implications of this study.

**Theoretical Implications**

**Complicating Conceptualizations of Familial Estrangement**

In addition to providing an introduction to the phenomenon of parent-child estrangement, the results of this study offer numerous theoretical implications. First, this study emphasizes the importance of communication in the dissolution process between family members. Often considered an emotional or psychological cutoff (e.g., Agllias, 2011a; Bowen, 1978; Jerrome, 1994), the present study illustrates the way
communicative practices deconstruct the family relationship and complicates existing conceptualizations of estrangement.

As Agllias (2013a) argues, scholars seem reluctant to define or even research the phenomenon of family estrangement in an in-depth manner. One contribution of this study is that it complicates simple definitions of estrangement by introducing it as a complex process. For example, diverging from the ambiguous loss conceptualization (Agllias, 2011a), which states that family estrangement involves either the psychological or physical absence of a person (the target parent in this study), this study revealed that adult children continuously discussed employing maintenance strategies to keep the distance they were able to attain or, even increase it, regardless of whether that person was physically present or absent. This constant communicative work suggests that the parent or parents are still psychologically present, despite their adult children's potential desire for this not to be the case. In fact, even stopping communication required participants to buck cultural norms, avoid family holidays, or even cease communicating with their entire immediate and sometimes extended family. Thus, in light of both the cultural pressures and reminders from social network members, the parent or parents were still (often very) salient to the adult children despite the distance they were able to accomplish and maintain.

In addition, in certain instances participants still wanted to retain some contact with their parent or parents despite also wanting to create boundaries to define the relationship. The desire for a certain amount of contact calls into question conceptualizations and indicators of familial estrangement (e.g., Agllias, 2011a; Warshak, 2010) that suggest estrangement requires some sort of extensive physical distance. For example, one participant described being driven to the interview by the parent from whom she talked about being estranged. The same participant also described continuously engaging in avoidance practices to construct boundaries to keep her father at a distance. This finding suggests that the quantity of the physical distance (how far
away the two individuals actually are) might matter less than the quality of that distance. In other words, being ten feet apart might be adequate if the adult child attributes a lot of relational meaning to those ten feet.

One of the most popular conceptualizations and indicators of estrangement involves emotional cutoff or a lack of emotional intimacy (Agllias 2011a; Bowen, 1982). Again, not all participants were so easily able to shut off their emotions toward their parent or parents. Participants would make comments about how they loved their estranged parent (Interview #7) and one went as far as to describe his estranged mother as, “a pleasant, God fearing, giving, great cook, wonderful, wonderful human being” that given different circumstances would be a “wonderful person to be around” (Interview #22). Consequently, it might come as no surprise that scholars are reluctant to define family estrangement. This study would suggest that one characteristic, like an emotional cutoff, is oversimplified, and does not account for the complexity of the experience.

Finally, the continuous avoidance work described by some participants also challenges definitions (e.g., Carr et al., 2011) that define estrangement as a lack of communication. Although centered in communication, and thus conceptually closer to my definition, defining estrangement as a lack of communication, again, oversimplifies a very complex process. As with these other characteristics of estrangement (e.g., physical distance, emotional distance), stopping communication is only one of the many practices adult children might engage in to distance themselves from a parent or parents. This present study, then, suggests that estrangement is complex; that it is a process that requires a constellation of communicative practices to move participants along a continuum of symbolic distance. By defining estrangement as merely one practice, we risk excluding many participants who perceive themselves to be estranged.

**Questioning the Voluntary-Nonvoluntary Relationship Binary**

The communication-based conceptualization and results from the present study depict the numerous ways adult children dissolve a relationship many scholars believe are
unbreakable (e.g., Hess, 2002; Schneider, 1980). In this regard, Hess’ (2002) definition holds up to a certain extent; nonvoluntary relationships are those where the individuals believe they have no viable choice but to maintain it. The problem with this definition is that not all members believe they have to maintain their family relationships. Clearly, many participants in this study came to a point where they did not believe they had any obligation to their parent or parents. Scholars should seriously consider refraining from defining all families as nonvoluntary, especially given the pressure this puts on individual family members who desire to leave abusive relationships.

Results from this study also suggest that relationships might not strictly be voluntary or nonvoluntary. Instead, it is possible that participants perceive their relationships to be more or less voluntary depending on their interactions. For example, in the case of parent-child estrangement, the culture would assume that the relationship is non-voluntary but adult children engage in practices and express beliefs that suggest that they feel torn about their commitment to their parent or parents or completely unobligated to their parent or parents in anyway. If all participants felt totally obligated or not, then participants would not have discussed multiple attempts at distancing or even some of the communicative practices they identified. For example, participants discussed visiting their parents on their own terms, such as Kevin who enacts the 24-hour rule. It is possible that Kevin falls somewhere on a voluntary-nonvoluntary continuum and feels a certain obligation to his parents, but does not feel the need to visit home for extended periods of time.

Alternatively, some relationships often perceived as voluntary such as friendships might become non-voluntary if the members of the friends feel, for example, they owe each other a personal debt or become financially interdependent in the case of business partners. In fact, a study by Braithwaite and colleagues (2010) found that one type of voluntary kin relationship was based on convenience contingent on a specific context or certain life stage. This type of voluntary kin might be voluntary at a particular moment in
time but move along the continuum when the person is out of context or transitions to a different stage of life. Consequently, this study challenges the idea that relationships are either voluntary or nonvoluntary, instead suggesting that individuals’ perceived obligation to a person might fluctuate along a continuum over the course of their lifetime. Opening the voluntary-non-voluntary dichotomy might create new opportunities for individuals to talk about different types of kin-like relationships. Thus, conceptualizing relationships on a continuum might be a productive avenue to explore kin making and unmakings.

**Resisting Cultural Norms**

Resisting the idea that family relationships are nonvoluntary also has implications for the discourse-dependence framework. According to Galvin (2006), family members increasingly rely on discourse when blood and legal ties fail to anchor the family relationship. From her point of view, families with biological and legal ties have to engage in less communicative work than those families without them. In Galvin’s conceptualization, blood and the law are not discourses but rather sit outside of communication. Contrary to this understanding, results from the present study illustrate the way participants resist the idea that families are enduring because of their biological ties (i.e., the discourse of non-voluntary family).

**Challenging the Discourse of Genetics**

One of the reasons that the presence of blood ties continues to emerge as a prominent feature in both scholarly (e.g., Galvin 2006) and lay conceptions of family has to do with the cultural importance we place on genetics. Leon (2002) argues that historically, genetics has staunchly grounded our conception of family. Baxter et al. (in press) explain, “Notions of inevitability and naturalness are accompanied by the assumption that a parent will have an inherent and unwavering love for a biological child” (p. XX). This inherent love is indissoluble (Miall, 1989). Thus, the discourse of
genetics not only serves to reify the family as biologically based, and thus enduring, but also implies that these biological links cannot be severed because of affective ties.

Yet, participants in the present study resisted the idea that their biological ties mattered. In fact, when participants resisted the discourse of genetics, they often made statements like, “You don’t have to suffer your family just because there is a blood tie” (Interview #2). Clearly, this participant, among others, blatantly states that biological ties are not important and should not be enough to keep you in an abusive relationship. Thus, through all the communicative practices enacted in addition to these examples of explicit resistance, adult children challenged the idea that families with biological ties do not have to communicatively work as hard as those without them. Ultimately, this finding strips the “natural” connection between biology and family, emphasizing the biology is just another discourse individuals have access to that helps them make meaning of their lives.

Leveraging the Discourse of Law

In addition to biology, Galvin (2006) also suggests that the law sits outside of our discursive world. One reason for this claim might be that as a culture, we treat the law as a “truth.” Another reason we afford the law so much gravitas might be that the culture enforces and adheres to the legal decrees of court officials such as judges and juries. For example, when a jury renders a guilty verdict, the guilty parties are immediately sentenced for the crime for which they allegedly committed. Thus, the law is often rendered by a speech act that has immediate repercussions and assumed to be true. Yet, the law is still a discourse, albeit a powerful one, that only exists because of its social construction. For example, we ask people to stop in the name of the law and the president signs laws into being. Laws do not exist outside of our understanding of them. Consequently, the law can serve as just another discourse to legitimate our actions to others and resist the discourse of nonvoluntary family.

Given the gravitas we afford the law, some participants took legal action to create distance from their parent or parents. For example, Allison legally emancipates herself
and Sophie legally changes her name, changes her durable power of attorney, and her will in order to maintain distance with her father. In this scenario, she relies on the law and the power of that discourse to supercede her biological tie to her father. This might come as no surprise considering there is significant precedent where the law trumps biology. For example, in the event of a divorce, legal custody hearings determine child visitation regardless of biological ties and especially when both adults have a biological relation to the child. Nevertheless, being biologically related is not enough in our culture to take a child when the law dictates otherwise. Thus, some participants leveraged the (discourse of) law to legitimate, accomplish, and maintain distance from their parent or parents, resisting the cultural assumption that families with biological links should stay together.

Privileging a Discourse of Affection

In addition to resisting the discourse of genetics by trying to displace it with the discourse of law, some participants gave voice to the alternate discourse of affection. As argued previously, the discourse of genetics suggests that parents love their children because of their biological ties. As it happens, research suggests individuals with voluntary kin relationships often sought them because their biological family did not adequately meet their needs for affection or because their biological family did not meet any of their needs for affection (Braithwaite et al., 2010).

In this study, participants resisted the discourse of genetics by privileging the discourse of affection, claiming their biological families could not provide them with what they needed. For example, Devina explains, “I’ve come to the conclusion and I’m at peace with the fact that I’ve made my own family now … that blood doesn’t really matter much” (Interview #37). Another adult child named Roxy explains, “Like society says that parent should love their kids, but you don’t always get parents you deserve, and sometimes it’s better to move on from that instead of letting it rip you up for the rest of your life” (Interview #24). Clearly Roxy challenges the social norm that parents love
their biological children by suggesting that you do not always get a loving family and sometimes its better to gain distance.

From one perspective, affection could be seen as an output or resource where individuals seek out new individuals because their needs for affection are not being met, as in the first attribution for acquiring voluntary kin. In effect, participants might believe they have “bad parents.” Perhaps a more interesting perspective is the possibility that adult children distanced themselves from their parent or parents because they failed to be a parent. Although conceptually similar, the idea that the relationship failed has interesting theoretical implications. Opposed to the first scenario where the parent failed to provide enough affection, the second scenario suggests that blood ties themselves have failed, challenging the idea that affection and blood are intrinsically related. Thus, in the first scenario, adult children created distance because they have a bad parent. In the second scenario, they created distance because they do not have a parent; that the person failed to definitionally meet the criterion of parenthood. Either way, adult children can privilege the discourse of affection to help make sense of and explain their negative relationship with their parent or parents to others.

Creative Resistance

Finally, some participants in this study creatively resisted the discourse of genetics and nonvoluntary family by simply denying their biological link to their parent. As detailed in the communicative practice, “I treated them like strangers/acquaintances/non-family,” adult children avoided negative cultural evaluations by engaging in practices like calling their “parent” by their first name, telling others they were dead, and talking about other people who served the role as mother and/or father. By denying their biological ties, these participants resisted cultural norms by failing to be associated with their “parent” or “parents.” A different label might better serve these participants, especially considering parent-child estrangement still makes reference to a relationship between the two parties.
Overall, the idea of creative resistance contributes to a larger scholarly conversation that questions whether hegemonic ideologies are best resisted from inside or from the outside of the system (see Lorde, 2003). Feminist scholar Lorde (2003) argues that using the available discourses (i.e., genetics, law, affection in this study) might temporarily resist hegemonic ideologies but, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 27). Thus, in concert with Lorde’s argument, those participants who deny their biological tie might enable and enact genuine change to the discourse of genetics and/or the discourse of nonvoluntary family. Cultural changes in the ways we understand what it means to be a family might have a significant impact both theoretically and practically.

Reconceptualizing Relational Maintenance

According to Dindia (2003), there are four definitions of relational maintenance found in the literature: (1) to keep a relationship in existence, (2) to keep a relationship in a specific state or condition, (3) to keep a relationship in a satisfactory condition (i.e., maintaining relational satisfaction or keeping the relationship intact), and (4) to keep the relationship in repair. The results from these data clearly problematize these conceptualizations of relational maintenance by challenging the assumption that individuals want to remain close (see introduction).

Perhaps the closest conceptualization that is compatible with the present findings is to keep a relationship in a specific state or condition, in this case, a “distanced state.” Yet, this definition also alludes that maintenance keeps a relationship static, or in an unmoving state. Thus, the definition does not capture the ways adult children employ multiple maintenance practices to not only maintain the desired level of distance but also to move along the estrangement continuum. In addition, Dindia suggests, “maintaining the state of a relationship prevents a relationship from deescalating, and consequently terminating” (p. 3). Thus, definitions of relational maintenance ultimately fail to capture
instances when individuals employ discursive strategies to maintain distance from a relationship with others.

In light of this oversight, a key contribution of this study is to reconceptualize relational maintenance to include the possibility that we not only communicatively work to keep our relationships close but also discursively enact practices to maintain distance with unwanted associations. Again, this finding corresponds to the dark side literature that suggests phenomena themselves are not inherently good or bad, bright or dark. Instead, bias toward relational maintenance as a positive concept should be attributed to the fact that scholars have associated it with positive outcomes such as relational satisfaction or closeness (e.g., Bell, Daly, & Gonzalez, 1987; Canary & Stafford, 1992). Thus, future researchers should take a dark side perspective and interrogate the functional ambivalence of relational maintenance (see introduction).

**Broader Knowledge Contributions**

**Contributions to the Dissolution Literature**

To date, scholars typically have only considered divorce as a way to dissolve our familial relationships. This study offers a compelling alternative whereby individuals engage in communicative practices to accomplish relationship dissolution. One particularly fruitful finding from this study emerged when participants discussed the communicative practices they enacted to accomplish and maintain distance. In absence of declarative practices, adult children employed communicative practices that simultaneously did the work of accomplishing and maintaining distance. Although scholars (e.g., Knapp, 1978) conceptually distinguish relationship initiation, maintenance, and dissolution as separate behaviors, this study’s results suggests that maintenance behaviors might permeate both initiation and dissolution processes. For example, the behaviors that we use to initiate relationships (e.g., disclosing personal information, interacting with each other, etc.; Clark, Shaver, & Abrahams, 1999) are also those we enact to maintain relationships (e.g., openness, sharing joint activity, positivity, etc.;
Canary, Stafford, Hause, & Wallace, 1993). In this study, stopping communicating with the parent, for example, also did dissolution and maintenance work. This finding suggests that individuals might always be discursively working, even when not performing a particular behavior (e.g., not communicating), to construct and deconstruct the relationships in which they are involved. Relationships, then, are not a container for our communication but rather, communication is (constitutes) our relationships.

**Family System Implications**

Family members often respond and adapt to stressful situations based on their immediate family’s ability to communicate, cope, and adapt together (Afifi, Hutchinson, & Krouse, 2006). Findings from this study support this claim given that the results suggest that parent-child estrangement often involved and impacted the entire family system. In particular, the reactions of the adult children’s immediate family often influenced the communicative practices they enacted to both disclose and sustain the estrangement. For example, adult children cited becoming estranged from their entire extended family in order to maintain distance with one or both of their parents or in other instances, the extended family excluded the target parent in order to maintain the relationship with the adult child. In this case, parent-child estrangement becomes familial estrangement for either the parent or the child. Put differently, decreasing interdependence with one family member might serve to decrease the interdependence of the entire system not only because the parent-child relationship is less interdependent but also because the rest of the family feels obligated to support either the parent or the child.

Overall, many of the communicative practices adult children used to sustain the estrangement involved negotiating interaction with their immediate family. Other practices involved asking a family member to refrain from talking to or about the parent or parents, hinting at the ways these practices influence extended family relationships. In addition, family estrangement has consequences for extended family members and social networks. For example, some participants discussed how their negative relationship with
their parent affected the relationship between their children and their parent (i.e., the grandchild-grandparent relationship) or even close friends.

As alluded to by participants and in support of existing research, estrangement is intergenerational (McKnight, 2003). Specifically, research suggests that intergenerational estrangement has negative implications on adult romantic attachment, including the increased likelihood of divorce (Bowen, 1982). Put differently, being estranged from a parent might lead to eventually becoming estranged from one’s own children later in life, as well as increasing the probability of a failed marriage. Thus, accounts from the participants in this study and previous studies suggest that estrangement comes with relational costs at the systems level (e.g., increased family conflict, increased likelihood of divorce, etc.). Yet, creating distance does not always lead to negative outcomes. The next section provides some examples how increasing distance with a parent or parents was beneficial to both the adult child and the family system.

**Supporting Evidence of a Closeness Bias**

As argued in the introduction to this study, scholars often associate closeness with positive relationship outcomes. Yet, findings from this study suggest that distance often facilitated very positive changes for the adult children and members of the children’s social network. For example, when asked what chapters of their story they would like to rewrite if they could, many participants responded by saying something like: “Um, honestly I kind of wish I would have done this sooner. I really do … I just wish I would have been brave enough to do this sooner” (Interview #32) claiming it would have been much “healthier” for them (Interview #17, #24). Other participants discussed very tangible benefits such as removing themselves to avoid extensive beatings (i.e., physical abuse), to avoid threats of harm (i.e., psychological abuse), or creating distance to avoid being raped (i.e., sexual abuse). In addition to this finding, a study by McKnight (2003) on intergenerational estrangement revealed that the greater the cutoff from the mother,
the better their adolescent child was able to function. Thus, it might come as no surprise that some scholars (e.g., LeBey, 2001; Sucov, 2006) argue that distancing oneself from ones’ family either temporarily or permanently was necessary to promote healing.

In concert with positive individual benefits, participants also discussed distance being positive for other members of the extended family. For example, one participant and I discuss the way distancing himself from his father positively impacted his mother and brothers:

INTERVIEWER: What about your mom?

BRAXTON: She also was really happy. Um, so it did really change, so we both knew yes, he's making progress but in the end he will never be what we need and want him to be. She was happy that summer was less conflictual and less "ugh" for her and my brothers as well as for my dad and I. Um, so, that was good, she was also happy.

INTERVIEWER: What about your brothers?

BRAXTON: So they are 16 and 12 now so they would have been a year younger, and they were both happy that the fights weren't happening as well … And I think eventually they might end up at the same place I did. Because, I know it's such an emotional toll. Like him, and the situation in general but I think they too sort of came to peace with the idea that yes, I'm here right now but I won't always be and when I'm not I too can be happy. I think it was sort of inspiration, no that's too strong of a word, but I think it sort of recognizing that there is an end date to this. (Interview #7)

Clearly, by enacting communicative distancing practices Braxton’s entire family experiences less conflict. Furthermore, Braxton suggests that the communicative actions he took might give his brothers hope that they no longer have to remain in a negative relationship. Thus, adult children did not necessarily perceive the communicative practices they use to distance themselves from a parent or parents to be negative. On the contrary, many participants suggested that the way they created distance had positive effects on their psychological and physical well-being. Taken together, results from this study supports evidence of a closeness bias (see Baxter, 2011) and illuminates the ways in which estrangement can be positive for both the adult children and their families. Next, this discussion of findings turns to practical applications.
Practical Applications

As a result of the many interviews with adult children in this study, several practical applications emerged that might help clinicians, social network members of the estranged individuals, and other individuals seeking to become estranged from their parent or parents. The following practical applications are detailed below.

Applications for Clinicians

Given the paucity of research on family estrangement, it is very possible that clinicians are engaging in many constructive counseling practices. However, as no existing research speaks to specific family estrangement treatment or counseling to my knowledge, I propose the following applications to serve as two recommendations for clinicians to consider. First, clinicians should consider conceptualizing estrangement as a process as opposed to a solidified identity. As detailed in chapter one, psychiatrists (e.g. Bowen, 1982) often suggest that estrangement is an emotional cutoff, which implies that estrangement is an event with a definitive end. Yet, many participants identified themselves as constantly moving along an estrangement continuum, sometimes identifying themselves as more or less estranged depending on the communicative practices they employed. In this regard, estrangement is not simply an emotional or psychological cutoff, but rather a complex communicative process that is continuously being negotiated through the enactment of maintenance practices. By focusing on the process, clinicians might be able to better serve their clients and tailor their recommendations to account for an on-going dynamic experience. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, conceptualizing estrangement as a process might help clinicians make sense of their clients repeated desire to revisit, or what Agliias (2011a) calls an obsession to think about the estrangement, the events that lead to the estrangement, a potential for reconciliation, or even revenge. When thought of as a process, rumination about a past event might be reconceptualized to be a healthy part of the sense-making and coping process that accompanies a never-ending process. Given
the prominence of Bowen’s work regarding emotional cutoff and the influence that it has
had on the ways clinicians view estrangement (Agllias, 2013a), reframing family
estrangement as process might have real implications for the ways clinicians make
recommendations to their clients seeking help.

Second, clinicians under certain circumstances might also suggest that adult
children who have distanced themselves from a parent or parent consider sharing their
story with others, especially in safe spaces like support groups. Overwhelmingly,
participants expressed that they thought they were the only ones to be estranged from a
parent or that they were completely alone. By sharing their story, participants might be
able to garner social support from people who “understand” their situations, especially
considering adult children often complained that members of their own social network
“didn’t get it.” In addition, sharing their story on something like an online forum might
also serve as an example (of how to create distance) for other individuals who are in an
unhealthy relationship with a family member. Finally, as argued, sharing one’s story also
helps individuals make sense of and cope with disruptive life events such as their
estrangement experience (Becker, 1997; Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1998; Koenig
Kellas, 2005). In fact, narrative therapy might be particularly helpful considering
participants described telling their story to others also as a way to continuously maintain
distance.

Applications for Social Network Members

In regards to social network members, one of the most salient comments adult
children expressed was their fear of being negatively evaluated by their immediate
family, extended family, friends, and co-workers. Often, they reported that the most
supportive behavior was when their social network did not judge them. Thus, social
network members seeking to support adult children who are distancing themselves from a
parent or parents might let the person know that they still consider them to be a good
person and validate the person’s decision to gain distance.
In conjunction with not expressing negative evaluation, social network members might seriously consider refraining from reconciliation attempts, or only attempting a reconciliation if asked. As detailed in the results, participants made strenuous efforts to both evade and reject attempts made by members of their network. Often participants indicated that they were not ready for forgiveness or that forgiveness was not ever going to be possible. A forced attempt at reconciliation might lead to decreased relational satisfaction or closeness between the adult child and the person who is attempting the reconciliation. This might be particularly detrimental to the adult child considering the majority of them never share their experience, which has real implications for the support they receive.

**Applications for Individuals Who Are In the Estrangement Process**

Finally, when asked what advice they would give to other individuals in a similar situation to theirs, participants often cited the following suggestions: (1) It’s okay to feel however you want – you’re not the only one, (2) get (professional) help – don’t do it alone, (3) trust in yourself – don’t let the guilt get in the way, (4) talk to other people – it doesn’t matter if they understand or not (keeping safety in mind), (5) stand up for yourself if you are in an abusive relationship – you don’t have to take it anymore, and (6) make sure the other person knows what the problem is – try to do what you can so you have no regrets. These recommendations emphasize the importance of communicating with the parent, with professionals, and social support network. Other recommendations speak to the cultural pressure adult children might encounter and how best to avoid feeling guilty for leaving an unhealthy relationship. Finally, participants most often made statements to let others know they were not alone. In fact, participants frequently shared as they narrated their stories that they did not know anyone else who was estranged from their parents. Letting others know about the prevalence of family estrangement might encourage others to leave abusive relationships or at least create a community of individuals who can talk about a shared experience. Taken together, hopefully all of
these recommendations can have some practical value for both clinicians and social network members who want to support individuals who are engaged in this familial distancing process.

**Limitations of the Study**

Although serving as a foundation for estrangement research and offering insight into the experiences and communication practices enacted by estranged individuals, no study is without limitations. As argued in chapter two, it is important to begin by emphasizing that because this study is interpretive, standards such as generalizability were never intended to be met. Instead, this present study provides an evocative account of a variety of the distancing practices employed by one particular group of individuals and consequently, the following limitations are germane to this sample.

A few limitations pertain to the homogeneity of the participants. All participants were garnered using a university listerv and collected at or geographically near a large Midwestern University. Although participants often indicated that they had lived in other areas of the United States, culture always permeates our interpersonal communication and experience (Phillipsen, 2008). For example, a study by Sigler, Burnett and Child (2008) found that individuals living in the upper Midwest were significantly less assertive than their counterparts from the New York Metropolitan Area/Northeast. Thus, it is very possible that individuals living in different parts of the country might have identified different communicative practices or at the very least influenced the salience of the practices reported.

The majority of participants were also Caucasian, which might have led to particularized results. Although a large white sample is representative of the state in which the data were collected, future researchers should explore the distancing practices of more racially and ethnically diverse populations. As alluded to by one of my ethnically diverse participants, her family’s ethnic/cultural beliefs significantly
constrained the communicative practices in which she was able to employ. Thus, it is very likely that different cultural factors might influence distancing practices.

Socio-economic class might be another factor that should be considered when exploring familial estrangement. Although these data was not collected explicitly, and thus a limitation of this study, the data suggest that participants with varying degrees of economic resources might have different communicative practices that are easier or harder to enact. For example, participants who have a lot of economic resources might be able to emancipate themselves from their parents because they have the financial resources to provide themselves with basic necessities (e.g., shelter, food, etc.) Of note, the children’s ages and level of dependence on their parent might also weigh heavily in their ability to attain resources.

Participants in this study reported highly varied amounts of time they were distanced from their parent or parents. In other words, some participants were just beginning their estrangement process whereas others signified that they had been estranged from their parents for decades. The possibility certainly exists that any of these participants might continue to enact new maintenance practices as time goes on or make meaning of some of their communicative actions different after they have gained perspective.

Finally, participants outright stated that they expected and thought that others would evaluate them negatively for being estranged from a their parent or parents. Asking participants who potentially perceived themselves as stigmatized to report on their behaviors might have positioned them to respond in ways to protect their face (see Goffman, 1963). In this scenario, participants might have left out certain behaviors that they felt would garner an adverse evaluation. In fact, participants often said phrases such as “I hope you don’t think I’m a bad person,” suggesting that negative evaluation was something on their mind. This limitation, in addition to the others detailed, might be
addressed in future family estrangement studies. Thus, I next offer some suggestions for future research.

**Directions for Future Research**

This study represents the foundation for a robust program of research on family estrangement, therefore, many directions for future research are possible. In fact, only a few of the many possibilities are discussed below. Researchers both within communication studies and in allied fields have a unique opportunity to apply multiple theories and methodologies to explore and examine the nuances of this important and distressing phenomenon.

As argued above, many possibilities with diverse samples exist to further illuminate the family estrangement experience. Participants of different ages, who come from different socio-economic classes, races, ethnicities, and religions have the potential to reveal new insights into the phenomenon. As argued in the limitation sections, different individuals with more or less economic resources might engage in different communicative practices to seek distance. Individuals with varying religions might experience additional pressure to stay in an abusive relationship or seek reconciliation. Cultures who place more value on community might also heavily influence individuals’ abilities to gain distance. Regardless of the avenue, diverse samples will provide researchers, clinicians, and social network members will important insight into the estrangement experience.

Additionally, different members of the family (e.g., from the parents perspective), different relationship groups (e.g., sibling estrangement), and different perspectives (e.g., sibling witnessing parent-child estrangement) should be also be explored to provide a new understanding of this phenomenon. For example, sibling estrangement might be considerably different than parent-child estrangement, especially considering siblings might have significantly less interdependent relationship (e.g., they might not every be financially ([inter]dependent). Building off the work of Agliias (2013b), researchers
might also explore the communicative practices from the parent perspective. Specifically, researchers might find extremely different accounts from parents who voluntarily and intentionally distanced themselves from their children and furthermore from children who perceive their parents distanced themselves. Finally, social network members, especially those who witnessed the distancing might have particularly important insights given their third party perspective. Again, many possibilities exist for research into this important phenomenon.

Given the importance of distance maintenance and sustainment, future studies should also address whether other individuals employ these distance maintenance strategies after they dissolve other types of relationships such as those with friends, romantic partners, or spouses. It is possible that communication and relationship scholars have been missing an essential component of the relationship dissolution process. For example, individuals who dissolve romantic relationships might have to engage in very similar distancing maintenance and sustainment practices especially if they were cohabiting (increased interdependence) or if their social networks heavily overlap. In this scenario, social network members might apply extreme pressure for the individuals to get back together. Consequently, future researchers should investigate the communicative practices individuals who dissolve other types of relationships must engage in to maintain and sustain their dissolution.

Another important direction of research pertains to social support and what adult children perceive to be supportive. Research suggests that support providers buffer against the deleterious consequences of stressors so long as individuals maintain connection with those providers (Cohen & Willis, 1985). Results from the present study suggest that social network members were either supportive or unsupportive, and these reactions influenced the communicative practices the participants enacted. Given this finding and that receiving a desired type of supportive communication enhances psychological well-being (Matsunaga, 2011), future researchers should explore both what
adult children perceive as supportive, what adult children desire in terms of social support, and how the adult seeks support. In particular, MacGeorge, Feng, and Burelson (2011) found that how individuals seek support directly influences the types and quality of support they receive as well as the corresponding outcomes.

In addition to this line of social support research, findings from chapter four suggest that participants perceive having someone “be there” for them is a particularly supportive behavior. Unlike social support practices (e.g., tangible support) that require the support provider to take some sort of action or make a communicative gesture, “being there” is a passive type of social support that might not require the “support provider” to do anything. In fact, a study by Scharp, Paxman, and Thomas (2013) found that homesick individuals were often most comforted by the “social presence” of their network members. Future research should explore this concept to determine whether social presence and passive support has positive outcomes for other individuals experiencing distressing life events.

Narratives are also a rich source to garner insight into the topic of parent-child estrangement. In light of the propensity of some participants to share their stories with others as well as the potential therapeutic benefits of story-telling, researchers might want to explore the ways individuals construct and perform their identity when telling narratives to others. Additionally, future researchers might want to take a narrative coherence approach (see Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Fiese & Sameroff, 1999; Fisher, 1987) to determine how individuals tell their estrangement narrative is associated with their psychological well-being. This approach focuses on the structure of a story and how stories function to help individuals made sense of their experience and identity in light of their experience. Regardless of the approach, narratives are a productive genre that might yield new insights into the estrangement experience and process.

Finally, given the pressure adult children experienced to continue to have some relationship with their parents for fear of being a bad child or violating cultural norms,
future studies might explore what family estrangement means and how estranged adult children discursively resist the cultural expectation violation that families are forever and implication that they are somehow bad children. In particular, relational dialectics theory could be an appropriate framework to explore the ways the discourse of nonvoluntary relationships and the discourse of abuse-free relationships compete to make meaning of the estrangement experience.

**Conclusion**

Exploring the communicative practices adult children enacted to accomplish, maintain, disclose, and sustain distance with a parent or parents set the foundation to help better understand the complex process of parent-child estrangement. At the heart of this study, participants illustrated the importance of communication in both constructing and deconstructing what it means to be a family. Put simply, both scholars and lay people should not take their family relationships for granted. In addition and of note, participants emphasized the importance of communicative maintenance and sustainment work, suggesting that scholars should not overlook the practices individuals employ during relationship dissolution. Finally, results from the present study also suggest that estrangement is an experience that has the potential to touch immediate family, extended family, and social network work members, increasing the importance of studying this phenomenon.

Overall, these findings can be practically applied to help clinicians, social network members hoping to provide support, and other individuals going through the estrangement process better understand and cope with the experience. As it happens, this is just one of the first steps to making sense of this complex process. Future researchers interested in this phenomenon have the opportunity to apply multiple theories and methodologies to better understand meanings, outcomes, identities, and best practices related to family estrangement in general and parent-child estrangement in particular.
APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

IRB ID #: 201305734

To: Kristina Scharp

From: IRB-02 DHHS Registration # IRB00000100, Univ of Iowa, DHHS Federalwide Assurance # FWA00003007

Re: Exploring Communicative Practices of Estranged Adult Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approval Date:</th>
<th>05/21/13</th>
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<td>Next IRB Approval Due Before:</td>
<td>05/21/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Application:</td>
<td>(\square) New Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populations:</td>
<td>(\square) Continuing Review Neonates</td>
</tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source of Support: 

This approval has been electronically signed by IRB Chair:
John Wadsworth, PHD
05/21/13 1033
IRB Approval: IRB approval indicates that this project meets the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects. IRB approval does not absolve the principal investigator from complying with other institutional, collegiate, or departmental policies or procedures.

Agency Notification: If this is a New Project or Continuing Review application and the project is funded by an external government or non-profit agency, the original HHS 310 form, “Protection of Human Subjects Assurance Identification/IRB Certification/Declaration of Exemption,” has been forwarded to the UI Division of Sponsored Programs, 100 Gilmore Hall, for appropriate action. You will receive a signed copy from Sponsored Programs.

Recruitment/Consent: Your IRB application has been approved for recruitment of subjects not to exceed the number indicated on your application form. If you are using written informed consent, the IRB-approved and stamped Informed Consent Document(s) are attached. Please make copies from the attached "masters" for subjects to sign when agreeing to participate. The original signed Informed Consent Document should be placed in your research files. A copy of the Informed Consent Document should be given to the subject. (A copy of the signed Informed Consent Document should be given to the subject if your Consent contains a HIPAA authorization section.) If hospital/clinic patients are being enrolled, a copy of the IRB approved Record of Consent form should be placed in the subject’s electronic medical record.

Continuing Review: Federal regulations require that the IRB re-approve research projects at intervals appropriate to the degree of risk, but no less than once per year. This process is called “continuing review.” Continuing review for non-exempt research is required to occur as long as the research remains active for long-term follow-up of research subjects, even when the research is permanently closed to enrollment of new subjects and all subjects have completed all research-related interventions and to occur when the remaining research activities are limited to collection of private identifiable information. Your project “expires” at 12:01 AM on the date indicated on the preceding page (“Next IRB Approval Due on or Before”). You must obtain your next IRB approval of this project on or before that expiration date. You are responsible for submitting a Continuing Review application in sufficient time for approval before the expiration date, however the HSO will send a reminder notice approximately 60 and 30 days prior to the expiration date.

Modifications: Any change in this research project or materials must be submitted on a Modification application to the IRB for prior review and approval, except when a change is necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects. The investigator is required to promptly notify the IRB of any changes made without IRB approval to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects using the Modification/Update Form. Modifications requiring the prior review and approval of the IRB include but are not limited to: changing the protocol or study procedures, changing investigators or funding sources, changing the Informed Consent Document, increasing the anticipated total number of subjects from what was originally approved, or adding any new materials (e.g., letters to subjects, ads, questionnaires).

Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks: You must promptly report to the IRB any serious and/or unexpected adverse experience, as defined in the UI Investigator’s Guide, and any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others. The Reportable Events Form (REF) should be used for reporting to the IRB.
Audits/Record-Keeping: Your research records may be audited at any time during or after the implementation of your project. Federal and University policies require that all research records be maintained for a period of three (3) years following the close of the research project. For research that involves drugs or devices seeking FDA approval, the research records must be kept for a period of three years after the FDA has taken final action on the marketing application.

Additional Information: Complete information regarding research involving human subjects at The University of Iowa is available in the “Investigator’s Guide to Human Subjects Research.” Research investigators are expected to comply with these policies and procedures, and to be familiar with the University’s Federalwide Assurance, the Belmont Report, 45CFR46, and other applicable regulations prior to conducting the research. These documents and IRB application and related forms are available on the Human Subjects Office website or are available by calling 335-6564.
APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

1. Age
2. Gender
   a. Man
   b. Woman
   c. Transgendered
   d. Other (please specify)
3. Please indicate the ethnicities with which you identify:
4. Please indicate the highest level of education you have received:
   a. Less than high school
   b. High school diploma (or GED)
   c. 2-year college degree (Associates)
   d. 4-year college degree (BA, BS)
   e. Master’s degree (MA, MS)
   f. Doctorate (Ph.D) or Professional degree (JD, MD)
5. Have you ever, or are you currently, seeking psychological counseling?
   a. I have sought counseling in the past
   b. I have not sought counseling in the past
   c. I am currently seeking counseling
   d. I am not currently seeking counseling
   e. I have thought about seeking counseling but never have gone
   f. Other (please specify)
6. I have a negative relationship with …
   a. One parent (mom, dad, other)
   b. Two parents (mom, dad, other)
   c. More than two parents (mom, dad, other)
   d. Other (please explain)
7. Distancing was …
   a. Unidirectional – (You wanted distance and your parent did not)
   b. Bidirectional (Both of you wanted distance)
   c. Other – please explain
8. Do you have any contact with that person?
   a. Yes: Regular
   b. Yes: Some
   c. Yes: Hardly Any
   d. No
9. How old were you when you first started to distance yourself from your parents?
10. I have maintained distance for … (Use decimal points for months if appropriate)
   a. ___ years
   b. On and off for ___ years
   c. Other
11. I have … (Please select ALL that apply)
   a. Discussed our negative relationship with my parent
   b. Discussed the negative relationship with my parent with other members of my immediate family
   c. Discussed the negative relationship with my parent with other members of my extended family
   d. Discussed the negative relationship with my parent with other members of my social network.
   e. Never discussed the negative relationship with anyone … it’s private/a secret.
   f. Please list the individuals with whom you have discussed the relationship (e.g., mom, brother, coworker, friend)
APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION TABLE
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID#</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Estranged Parent</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Counseling</th>
<th>Interview Time</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Both</td>
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<td>18 On/Off</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Dad/SM</td>
<td>Hardly Any</td>
<td>16 On/Off</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>75 min, 30 sec</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Andy</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Hispanic/Caucasian</td>
<td>Mom</td>
<td>Hardly Any</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>23 min, 35 sec</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Connie</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Mom</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>49 min, 24, sec</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Mom</td>
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<td>5.85</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Dad</td>
<td>Regular</td>
<td>40 On/Off</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>75 min, 05 sec</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Braxton</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Dad</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Faith</td>
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<td>Mom</td>
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<td>37</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>56 min, 39 sec</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>HISPANIC</td>
<td>Dad</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>4 On/Off</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>50 min, 20 sec</td>
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<td>Harley</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Mom</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>39 On/Off</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Mom</td>
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<td>24 min, 22 sec</td>
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APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Date of Interview: ___________________ Location: ___________________
Time Begun: ______________________ Time Completed: _________________

Introduction and Purpose of Interview

I am conducting this interview as a part of my dissertation project for a Ph.D. in Communication Studies at the University of Iowa. I am interested in learning more about the experiences of adult children who have a negative relationship with their parent(s).

You have volunteered to participate in this project as an individual who has a negative relationship with at least one parent and has voluntarily and intentionally sought to distance yourself because of that negative relationship – is this correct? Are you also at least 18 years of age? Finally, would you mind if I audio recorded this interview and took brief notes?

Remember that you do not have to answer any question(s) that you are not comfortable answering and you can stop this interview at any time if you so choose. Also, please know that all information shared in this interview is confidential and cannot be traced back to you. Once our interview is recorded it will be transcribed and your information will not be attached to the recording or the transcript in any way. Your name will not appear in the data, nor will the names of your family members. Pseudonyms will be used in any papers written for the dissertation. Are you ready to begin?

First, I would like to review the information and questionnaire you received prior to our interview. Let’s go over those documents now and I will answer any questions you might have about the project.

____ Informed Consent Sheet - obtain verbal agreement to participate.

____ Preliminary Background Information

Do you have any questions about the background information survey?

So, you have identified [relationship to adult child] as the person or persons with whom you have negative relationship, correct? And this voluntary and intentional distancing is sought by [you or both]? And you currently [have, have some, or have no] contact with that person? And you [have or have not] discussed your relationship with your [person] with [social network members including other family members]?
Possible Interview Questions and Probes:

Today, I’m going to ask you to tell me the story of how you distanced yourself from the relationship with your [mom and/or dad]. I’m going to ask that you think of yourself as the author of a novel. There’s no right way to tell your story but I am interested in hearing about it from the beginning and then step-by-step ... or we can think of everything you did as a different chapter of the novel. As you tell your story, please stop at the beginning of each chapter and let’s come up with a word or phrase to represent that chapter. Like any novelist, you can edit the chapters you have already written, either adding more or retelling certain sections, whenever and however you would like. I’m also interested in the cast of characters. In other words, who else was present or who else did you talk to about distancing yourself from your [mom and/or dad]? Just remember – you’re the author, feel free to write your story however you’d like.

Before we get started, can you tell me a little bit about negative relationship with your [mom and/or dad] We can think of this as the introduction to the novel, a way to provide context for what’s to come ...

CHAPTER ONE:
- What’s the first action you took?
  - What, if anything, did you say to your parent(s)?
  - How did they respond?
- How did you feel?
- Did anyone know this had happened?
  - Did you tell them?
    - Immediate Family?
    - Extended Family?
    - Friends?
  - What do you/someone else do or say to let them know?
  - What is their reaction?
- Did the action you take accomplish what you wanted?

CHAPTER TWO:
- What did you do next?

Chapters ... until the participant does feel there are no more chapters to their story.

When, if at all, does your relationship with your parent(s) come up?
- How do you negotiate this?

Did you ask anyone for help in seeking distance?
- Did you feel like anyone took sides?

Did you ask for support?
- Did others support you?
  - How?
  - Was it helpful?
  - Did you feel like you got the support you needed?
  - What would be helpful
- Is there anyone you feel like you can’t talk to?
- Do you feel like you negative relationship is secret or private?
- Has your desire to distance yourself influenced any of your other relationships?
  - How so?
- Are you concerned about what other people might think about what is happening?
At this point, is there any part of the story you would like to edit? You can add in another chapter or amend what you’ve already written.

Continuing with the metaphor of the novel, can you talk to me about what you’d like future chapters to sound like? In other words, how would you like this story to continue, if at all?

• Do you see yourself ever reconciling? (contingent/no)

What about any chapters you might like to rewrite if you could? In other words, is there anything you wish were different?

Have you ever broken up with a romantic partner or friend?
• How is distancing yourself from your parent the same or different?

Would you consider yourself to be estranged or in the process of estranging yourself from your parent?

• What does estrangement mean to you?
• In general, do you characterize estrangement as good, bad, or both?
• Thinking of your specific relationship with your parent(s) – do you feel like it is good, bad, or both?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

What advice would you give to other people or families in similar situations?
APPENDIX E: ACCOMPLISH AND MAINTAIN PRACTICES
TABLE E.1 Accomplish and Maintain Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Sub-Practice</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Declarative Practices</strong></td>
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<td>I told them it was over</td>
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<tr>
<td>I delivered an ultimatum</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I sought third party intervention</td>
<td>I accepted my family's intervention</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I received government intervention</td>
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<tr>
<td>I stood up for myself</td>
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<td><strong>One-Time Practices</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>I moved away</td>
<td>I moved in with another family member</td>
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<td>I attended college far away</td>
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<td>I moved out of the house</td>
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<td>I got romantically involved</td>
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<td>I made it difficult for them to find/contact me</td>
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<td>I took legal action</td>
<td>I legally emancipated myself</td>
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<td>I changed my legal documents</td>
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<tr>
<td>I stood up for others/became an activist</td>
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<td>I got a tattoo</td>
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<td><strong>Continuous Practices</strong></td>
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<td>I stopped communicating with my parents</td>
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<td>I avoided my parents</td>
<td>I reduced my contact with my parent</td>
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<td>I hid from them</td>
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<td>I only communicated at a superficial level</td>
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<td>I lied to them</td>
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<td>I stayed away</td>
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<td>I did not visit when they were sick</td>
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<td>I treated them like a stranger/acquaintance/non-family</td>
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<td>I colluded with my family</td>
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<tr>
<td>I told my story to others</td>
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APPENDIX F: DISCLOSE AND SUSTAIN PRACTICES
TABLE F.1 Disclose and Sustain Practices

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<td>I did not disclose because</td>
<td>I thought the information would be a burden</td>
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<td>I perceived the disclosure as inappropriate</td>
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<td>I did not think I could</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I did not have anyone to tell</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I thought everyone knew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was there</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I disclose</td>
<td>I respond when asked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I deny their existence</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I disclose to everyone</td>
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<tr>
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<td>I show them the correspondence</td>
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<td>I narrate as if I'm a third party</td>
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<td><strong>RQb: Sustainment</strong></td>
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<td>I respond to reconciliation attempts</td>
<td>I refuse their attempts</td>
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<td>I evade their attempts</td>
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<td>I do not bring it up</td>
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<td>I became estranged from others family members</td>
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<tr>
<td>I asked others to stop talking with the parent</td>
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<td>I asked other to stop talking about the parent</td>
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<td>I carefully negotiated family functions</td>
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<td>I asked to meet with them separately</td>
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<tr>
<td>I did not sustain because of third party interference</td>
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